John Pyros

WILLIAM WANTLING: A BIOGRAPHY & SELECTED WORKS

$4.50

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Printed by D.J. Graphics, Peoria, and M&D Printer, Henry, Illinois for The Spoon River Poetry Press, D. R. Pichaske, editor.

Photograph on front cover by Art Greenberg.
Photograph on back cover courtesy Ruthie Wantling.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Along with Mrs. Ruthie Cooper Wantling, the late poet's wife who was most sharing, co-operative and understanding, others whom I'd like to thank for their help in this work are Mrs. Katherine Franks Wantling, the poet's mother; Len Fulton, editor of the *Small Press Review* who first suggested the project; Prof. William Linneman of Illinois State University; Prof. James Scrimgeour of University of Western Connecticut; writer Sam Zaffari, who shared insights and experience he alone had regarding Wantling; A. D. Winans, editor of Second Coming Press; Robert Head and Darlene Fife of *Nola Express*; Trevor Reeves, New Zealand editor; Rich Mangelsdorf; John Bennett; Marvin Malone; Prof. Robert Moore; Greg Koos, archivist of the William Wantling Papers, McLean Co. (Illinois) Historical Society; Ms. Ellen M. Haasch for editorial and technical assistance; Thomas M. Whitehead, head of Special Collections, and Elliot Shore, curator of the Contemporary Culture Collection, both of Temple University; Helen E. Walls; and Prof. David Pichaske, this book's editor, of Bradley University.

PREFACE

People always seek to explain genius and, of course, they seek to explain it in their predictably patented narrow terms. Nevertheless there are but two distinct possibilities: blind luck or the fruition of repeated incarnations. Thus, either genius is the sheerest of sheer coincidences or it is the current culmination of a multitude of previous existences. You pays your money and you takes your choice. For this reason facile attempts to explain genius in terms of heredity or environment, assorted chauvinisms, nature, nurture, religiosities, physical-mental-moral handicaps, social upheavals, economic down-turns, natural up-turns, over-compensations, under-compensations, heart-burn, dyspepsia, or the dire affects of the Big Dance in Hohokus have to be discarded as purest delusory balderdash. Hence, this book's hard avoiding any attempts to "explain" the genius of the late William Wantling. The hard fact is it was either dumb luck or the unique and transient climax of a soul in its long journey toward Nirvana/Happy-hunting-ground/Heaven. Either way, we remain mystified, awe-struck, and aghast before a poet who, at the top of his form—when the stars and the cards and the fates and the influences and the moon and the tides were right—spoke with a riveting and peerless clarity, precision and brilliance to the mid-Twentieth Century spirit-mind.

And so follows a brief biography of William Wantling, 1933-1974, wayfaring midwestern American poet. While certain details and facts may be missing or slightly awry, it is hoped their accuracy of essence remains. In some cases, because the living are still living, not all persons have been fully identified. Author's bias and personal prejudice should be readily apparent. Occasionally a poem title is omitted. Also, the poetry—though accurately quoted—has been typed in a form different from the original; Wantling's texts must be consulted for correct renderings. Very little literary criticism is offered, and the poetry is noted mainly to help elucidate Wantling's life/time. A selection of Wantling writings, made by my editor David Pichaske, follows the biographical sketch.

Withal, it is greatly hopes the spirit of the poet's life has not been violated. Observe, in offering this life of William Wantling—in its best sense, a life like any other—absolutely no ill will is intended toward any thing or person, dead or living.

More as background, since literary criticism is not within the ken of this study—the following is a brief smattering of comments on Wantling's poetry. Among the most perceptive insights were those of critic-novelist Len Fulton, currently publisher of *The Inter-*

national Directory of Little Magazines and Small Presses and author of several novels, including *Dark Other Adam Dreaming* and *The Grassman.* In his essay on Wantling's *San Quentin's Stranger*, Fulton observed "along the axis of his own imminent destruction Wantling's movement is relentless." According to Fulton, this axis was the "Four Horsemen—War, Dope, Prison, Government." As did indeed so many others, Fulton foresaw Wantling's self-obliteration and explained it as an occurrence where "in each new-dawn terror Wantling awakes to scan the shimmering distance for the faint dust of a rider, puts his ear against the ground and hears the growing beat of chaos . . . ."

Or as Wantling in his "There Goes Another Sidetrip" even thus describes his Heironymous Bosch-like terrors,

& then
just when I think I'm
getting my shit together
the humming starts, the static
& sideways
upside down & just at the
edge of my eye
in come the metallic grey chesspieces of
the Insect Trust

rank & file spears & chorus line
moving on the Martian track. stop. go
back out again

silence

just to remind me

Nonetheless, Fulton noted, Wantling continued to struggle "in dull caves of undersea light for his humanity and his plot of free space under the raging sun . . . ," even though he was not likely to emerge victorious, even though he was doomed to be cut short, "for the Horsemen are swift coming, swift going and swift coming back." In an earlier introduction to the same Wantling work, Fulton described him similarly as "one of the last of the big psychic spenders." And, of course, if Wantling was anything he sure as shooting was that.

Robert Moore, writing in the Illinois State University *Vidette* (around 1966) perceived Wantling as "one of the finest young poets in the United States. His range, both intellectually and emotionally, is fantastic. His poetry is tight and exact, seeing things through the mind of the intellectual and the heart and soul of the peasant, the sufferer . . . . He, like all truly good poets, sees common things in a way never seen before."

Poet/critic Kirby Congdon, also writing around 1966 in an introduction to one of Wantling's small press publications, echoed the same two themes: gut-wrenching poetry and self-destructive life style. Congdon noted, "Wantling was fulfilling what I had been looking for in poetry: not technique nor sound nor literary references, but emotion and ideas and action with living blood in them."

Lauding Wantling's poetry which discarded "literary pretensions" in favor of communication, Congdon went on to state, "it is this difference that makes Wantling necessary to us and to the current development of poetry . . . . A change in poetry has come about because poets like Wantling have brought not only their art but the whole man into the poem. Here is what William Wantling has done." And again, as nearly everyone with whom Wantling came into contact, Congdon added the melancholy hedging that "there will more, if his search for that vague something called Truth does not consume the man entirely."

"New" critic Rich Mangelsdorff saw Wantling as having "a lion's heart which adds humble but smoulderingly fierce dignity to his utterances" (*Small Press Review,* no. 22), while English critic John Tripp reiterates the two main facets of Wantling's poetry were his penchants for myths and self-destruction. Tripp noted Wantling was "a natural poet who has somehow succeeded in making the terrible material of his life and experience into something real, and, at times, almost mythical." He further observed Wantling as an archetypal underground figure, "rightly regarded as being trapped in circumstances quite beyond his control. His world usually makes him feel sick—hence the resort to drugs and small-time crime, he is the disgusted fly in the thick web, yet much love in his heart, still amazingly skewered on a concept of hope." Tripp perceived of the poems as "authentic reports from the very center of the garbage dump" (America), and finally he too concluded with the almost *de rigeur* cautionary "Wantling may yet find his way out of that web and die happy on some outlying farm, having made his contribution." (As we all know, that was not to be.)

In contrast, a critic for *Poetry Review* (summer 1971) wrote a scathing attack in which he called Wantling's poetry "rubbish . . . it is diary potpourris of soft centers self-consciousness derangements and 'protest'." Then, rather in contradiction to this vehemence, he concluded, "I can scarcely contain my indifference."

These, then, were the basic contemporary views regarding Wantling's work. Those who judged him favorably saw a few great poems and great promise racing against self-annihilation. Others considered the poetry rubbish. The only certainty is he lived, he suffered, he died.

BIOGRAPHY

William Wantling was born November 7, 1933 within the adjacent towns of Robein and Valley View—now East Peoria—Illinois, the only child of Dewein and Katherine Franks Wantling, and the first child born to his father's side in twenty-three years. With a perverse pride Wantling used to claim William S. Bonney (the infamous Billy the Kid) as one of his great uncles. Billy the Kid's brother, known in the family as Grandpa Bonney, wrote a book, was a hard drinker and an excellent stonecutter (his work remains in Peoria area buildings); he is often considered the source of Wantling's literary and roustabout penchants.

Wantling's father, Dewein, worked for many years as supervisor and accountant for a farm machinery company. He is remembered as an extrovert, a voracious reader, overbearing and opinionated. From the early age of eleven, Wantling disliked visiting in his authoritarian and boisterous father's presence. Notes made by an older Wantling show a decision to become a writer made early in his teens, and antagonism toward school at the age of eight. In an unpublished treatise "Brownie Points" Wantling recalls deciding to quit competing for grades with his friend Eddie, satisfied that his peers "knew of this situation"—i.e., of Wantling's intellectual superiority.

Wantling's decision not to attend college did not seem to bother his father, although both were bibliophiles. Perhaps both father and son feared Oedipal rivalries, compassion, vengances. Rather his father hoped Wantling would start as an apprentice in the company wherein he was himself employed. Upon graduating from East Peoria High in 1951, Wantling worked for a very short period beside his father and then, in an early example of non-conformity, irresponsibility and rebellion, quit—much to his father's embarassment—and took off for Chicago.

Of Wantling's adolescence little is recalled: he played trombone in the high school band (whence came his later jazz interests); he disliked physical education; he loved to read; he remembered fondly a certain Miss Dow; and finally, influenced by a jingoistic high school counselor, Wantling and several of his graduation classmates decided to join the Marines, America being then in the midst of the Korean Conflict.

Some of Wantlings own recollections of this childhood are to be found in his unpublished novel Hunched in the Belly, written while a student at Illinois State University. They are interesting in light of his recurring fears, their continued persistence, and their presumed effect on his drug-needs and the self-acknowledged "humming" that never stopped:

I looked at my own feet as they climbed the steps which were new to me yet remembered, familiar, echoing from the endless passages of a repetitive childhood nightmare. I knew these steps. How many times as a child had I woke whimpering from feet imbedded in the unyielding substance of those very steps while behind me a pack of howling vague things came ever closer to the warning tender spot of spine between my shoulder blades? I could feel the things now, coming closer out of the childhood nightmare so common to the six-year-old just passing through the guilt and fear of his Oedipal dream.

In another unpublished vignette, "The All-American Archetype," Wantling remembered the devastation he suffered from deducing that childhood radio-fiction characters Jack Armstrong, Uncle Jim, Betty and the rest were a hoax! In one of the episodes Uncle Jim was arrested for speeding, and "by the time the explanation came, I was full of doubts about all that tight little in-group. Jack, Billy, Betty, Uncle Jim—all were at once perhaps fallible! And I was suddenly seven years old and had begun to lose some of my innocence." Wantling was prone to profound disillusionment and vulnerable to the inevitable blights and plights of life.

Even more revealing was Wantling's habit, revealed in "Brownie Points," of refusing to do as well or better academically than those who were intellectually less capable than he. In seeking anti-brownie points through "the pattern established in the early grades of school—not trying for grades, making myself disliked by my grade and high school teachers, and eventually quitting school upon high school graduation in my 16th year," Wantling was putting as much effort into failing as others put into success. This pattern of behavior had been so deeply ingrained in him that long after whatever psychological viability it may have had was gone, he persisted in it to the tune of fucking up for the whole of his life. In "Brownie Points" we discern an early quasi-glamorous desire to self-destruct increasingly aided and exacerbated by Wantling's lust for drugs. For whatever deep-dark-dank reason, Wantling chose early to achieve through underachieving. The rationalizing philosophies came long after.

In Wantling's early career we can discern two patterns he was to express throughout his life: first, tremendous cascades of energy pouring out in efforts to fail, fuck up, forfeit limb, love and life (take a moment and calculate the torrential energies needed to be an alcoholic, a hophead, a junkie! And this was the delimiting scope of "success" Wantling sought!); second, a constant feeling of betrayal by all those about him—so much was he enamored of his "freedom" from anti-brownie points!

If this be the case, his drugs were paradoxically to achieve not highs but lows: to flaunt his rejection of society, to intentionally limit his abilities to play those games his society played, to make failure more palatable, to incur/incite/invite that self-fulfilling prophecy of a vengeful God/society Wantling believed to be wrathful. One might further speculate that Wantling so greatly feared the suspense of rejection or so greatly expected or desired it that he rejected and/or forced rejection and preferred the unwavering certainty of hatred and rejection to the wavering uncertainty of love and acceptance. And so Wantling noted, while he found himself laboring—twenty years later—to achieve what Eddie, as dean of a small college, had already achieved, that he continued to digress from his own inadequacies to concentrate on those who sought "brownie points." Surely it would have been better for Wantling to perceive that the errors of others did not necessarily guarantee the correctness of their opposite. (So much for frail humanity and/or egomanical deaf-dumb and blind ignorance.)

Further on Wantling's childhood. In "Lemonade 2¢," he remembers his first kiss: "Lord, how out lips/ trembled how bittersweet/ & cool that lemonade." In "Head Shop" Wantling depicted himself as "Peoria Illinois' most enthusiastic atheist at the age of 12," suggesting a greater seething of non-conformity's fires than one would have suspected in this average kid pursuing the average plebian goals of a rah-rah tussle-ass victory touchdown in an om-pah do-wop high school marching band. Wantling's second wife, Ruth Ann Cooper, recalls playing the then classic "Spin the Bottle" when Wantling was fifteen, she thirteen.

In 1952, at the age of seventeen, in escape/rebellion/allegiance/anger/boredom/and ritual-macho, Wantling forced his parents consent and enlisted in the Marines. The decision was characteristic of his drive to self-destruction: on the one hand, the Marine Corps is among the most rigid of human organizations; on the other, Wantling was among the most rebellious of persons. Since the rigors of Marine life are as well known as those of heroin, one cannot fully say Wantling was unaware of his decision. That he was naive of its basic premises, that he did not quite realize he could not casually quit—both are superfluities. Wantling saw the gauntlet of Marine life and grabbed it.

(Digression: Wantling's mother mentions his writing of one incident where as punishment he was forced to eat peanuts and tobacco until he vomited. It is interesting, significant, and consistent with Wantling's intermittant yet predictably rhythmic self-indulgent whine that he related this difficult incident to his mother. Surely, since she was powerless, little good could come of it. Where some sons would have shielded their parents from such worries, Wantling callously bared his wail, his pain, his trouble, his travail. He protected neither himself nor others.)

It is not illogical to presume Wantling more or less placed himself in these troubled binds, situations that were his own post-pubescent, diaper-dry-me suicidal cries for help, vengence, mewlings, whimperings—and—me/me/me/me!

After basic training Wantling was sent to Korea for preparation of those things eventually most significant in his life: drugs, poetry and political radicalism. Wantling often recalled his military experiences, usually with bitterness. In "Pusan Liberty" he recreated his first pre—California drug contact, two Chinese youths, "the so-called Enemy & I, but just 3 angry boys lost in the immense absurdity of War & State . . . ." Another Korean recollection is his poem "I Remember":

I remember the time
Black got it
incoming knocked him back
into a snowbank
    buried him
he was Mission In Action
    all winter

spring thaw & we were
back on the same hill &
the Lt. stumbled on him
cracked his shin-bone on
Black's helmet & looked
down at Black, preserved like
a fresh side of beef
    all winter

"You Sonofbitch," he said
to Black's stiff corpse

"You Sonofbitch, if you'd
been more careful I
wouldn't hafta write
all those Goddam letters"

"You Sonofabitch" & he spit

but I'd seen his eyes
    watering before he looked
    straight up into the sun

In his poem "Sure" Wantling relived with great sadness, painfully in light of his later pacifism and communality, some of the killing of Korea:

but how can you be a pacifist after
you've killed too many & one is too many
Where do I stand with my score?

What I wouldn't give to go back,
and start all over.

Wantling recorded more of his Korean experiences in his uncompleted novel *Hunched in Its Belly* through his persona Cole:

> Korea soared back into his mind. He resisted, but the pulse of its wings was violent and it pounded like a vulture past all his barriers. A full moon had shone white and frozen on the powdered snow. The snow squeaked beneath his boots as he crouched and ran towards the summit of the hill, that hill he was so familiar with, the one he thought of as his. His regiment had lost and then regained the hill at rhythmic, regular intervals. He had gone on patrol alone because he preferred the efficiency of a one-man patrol. He had gone to see if the Chinese had really left, as the Forward Artillery Observers had that afternoon reported.
>
> The night, the barren moon on the drifting snow, had called to him. And then, on his third loop through the scrub-pines on the summit, convinced the Chinese were gone, he had seen two oxen, standing knee-deep and alone in the snow. He circled a scrub-pine and there they were, suddenly, motionless as two brown mounds in the moonlight. He stood silent so as not to startle them, stood erect and silent as an absolute feeling of peace washed over him, like the first warm wave of sleep. A small cloud of steam rose around them, rose in the twenty-below air, and he carefully focused his eyes, squinting. They were urinating in the snow.
>
> And then something beneath the oxen moved. He crouched, not even breathing, as a form broke from under the oxen and crawled swiftly to one side. It was a man in a quilted Chinese jacket. Cole thought irrationally, in a detached vacuum having nothing to do with himself, that the Chinese had probably been keeping warm beneath the oxen, and had moved to escape their urine. He must have been left behind as a lookout. Cole raised his carbine and shot the man. The slug went through his neck, penetrating the jugular vein, and as Cole ran closer to make certain he was dead, the man sunk to his hands and knees, poised there like a fighter waiting for the nine-count, and the blood spurted from his jugular, spurted straight down in a tight hot stream and bored a small, smoking hole into the snow.
>
> Cole stood over him. He was a young boy, perhaps fifteen. He noted the boy's mangled left foot and how his ankle bone shined whitely through the crusted blood there. It looked like the work of a mortar or mine, and he had obviously been left behind to die. Now the hot steam from the boy's jugular slowed to a steady drip and he sank into it, sank down to cover the dark, smoking hole he had made.

Wantling used his novel to examine his youthful patriotism:

> I'd been in Korea at 18, a volunteer who was not naive enough to believe he had joined the Marine Corps and asked for Korea out of patriotism, but yet did not have enough self-knowledge to know he'd sought the opportunity to indulge in socially approved murder.
>
> Yet the inner logic was undeniable—it was a game in which every player understood the rules, everyone was aware of the hazards—and at the expense of this knowledge one might purge oneself of hate so finally, so irremediably, that perhaps love could then finally enter. For one cannot remain an inner void, and if one's hate is thoroughly purged, one's intuition told one that love could then enter and one could then return to the time and beauty of childhood grace.

Wounded in Korea, ten days in a coma, eight weeks in a hospital, a leg which remained permanently scarred—his mother recalls a letter in which Wantling spoke of the euphoria he felt through the pain-killing morphine administered in his convalescence. Certainly the morphine coupled with his Korean drug contacts to push Wantling down the long, hard highway to drugdom.

Discharged on the west coast with the rank of sargeant, a Purple Heart, other medals and citations, Wantling returned to Peoria and his mother, his father having died at the age of 46 on October 22, 1952. He felt immediately the absence of those things that had become so necessary to his newly alienated life style: drugs, jazz, hip-dom, and a vaguely ephemeral radicalism. In "The Enemy Camp" he recalled he "couldn't even find one lousy joint and nobody here ever heard of Peyote . . . ." After a short time he split for the coast. Though he was not overly optimistic, perhaps another larger, more urbane enemy camp would hold more hope/dope/anonymity—and a fresh face.

Wantling arrived on the west coast around 1955, and the gods alone know what precisely transpired there. Suffice it to say he fell on dark days. He married a woman named Luana and had a son named Ricky, born in 1957. *Hunched in Its Belly* suggests he sported with hard trade, hard deeds, hard cases and hard, hard times:

> As Cole looked into his mirror he saw its driver waving frantically out the window. Cole pulled over and stopped. The car behind did the same, about twenty feet away. It was Schermer.
>
> —He wants to take me home, Lee predicted tonelessly, still glancing in her little mirror. —Will you let him? Her voice was full of a certain resignation.
>
> —**What?** Man, he knew better than that.
>
> —Huh. You know what he wants. **Share the chick**, that's the

game you guys always play. The contempt in her voice said things that angered and disturbed him. He walked back to Louie, who was leaning out the driver's window and smiling sardonically.

—How was it, Cole? Cole searched his face, then replied carefully, —Fine, Louie. Very nice.

—I've got good taste, Louie bragged. —How about letting me have her now? I'll take her home.

—Sorry, Louie. Sorry about that.

—What d'ya mean, Man, I turned you on to her, didn't I? C'mon, he wined.

—You didn't pick up, Louie. Cole glanced back at the Jag. Lee was sitting rigidly upright in the seat, staring straight ahead.

—What d'ya mean? C'mon man, don't be that way. I know a lot of chicks you'd dig, I could fix you up with. I'm strapped tonight, 'sall. Let me take her home.

—I said you didn't pick up, Louie. Cole spoke slowly, softly, enunciating carefully. —I . . . love her.

—Her? Louie laughed hoarsely, unbelievingly. Lee? That whore? Man you must be jiving. Man . . . his laugh faded away. He shook his head disbelievingly. Then he tried again. —Man, ask her. Ask her, Cole. See if she won't go with me. Hell, tell her to go with me. She'll do it.

Cole didn't get angry. He knew Louie, knew that Louie was in his own way trying to tell him not to get involved. But he was tired of it, all of it, and he had heard something in Lee's voice as she'd said —You know what he wants that disturbed him. He knew what he had to do to end it and carefully, without anger and with a determined careful kind of apologetic force he brought up his open right hand and slapped Louie backhanded across the mouth. Louie's lip split and a drop of blood appeared, ran like a raindrop down his chin and another drop appeared to replace it. Louie's head was still halfway out the car window as he stared unbelievingly at Cole. Cole brought up his open hand again and repeated the gesture, this time splitting the lower lip. He turned and walked slowly back to the muttering car, got in, shifted to low and pulled out into traffic.

What seems strangest about this incident is Lee's (Luana's) relatively passive reaction to her role as psychic chattel, pounded flesh, emotional collateral.

Allegedly it was Luana, herself a user, that turned Wantling on to hard drugs, although there had been morphine and hash and what-all else in Korea. He became addicted to heroin and suffered greatly. A Bloomington, Illinois friend, Sam Zaffiri, remembers Wantling describing his Los Angeles scams as he cruised the streets, desperate with

craving, with another addict named Eskimo, searching to steal, mash, kill-if-it-came, and score, score, score. Apart from poems, legal documents, prose pieces, and Sam Zaffiri's secondary accounts, little first hand information remains concerning Wantling's subterranean experiences on the coast during the mid-fifties. And lost in the sludges and slimes and intermittant sloughs of euphoria, Wantling himself probably knew the least of anyone about his hapless hop-head capers along the coming-down-down-down coast.

In his poem "Initiation" Wantling portrays a couple "sick, seeking magic," the woman offering "to do some good tricks," the man, "indignant like a square," told by her, "Don't cry Daddy, it's just another way to burn a sucker."

Two fleeting-floating good world moments were recorded from these days by Wantling: "Once 3 scoops of icecream," and once happy with his wife:

> that was twice
> the rest was nothing, even
> less
> the pain's still there.

In "Death in Los Angeles," Wantling wrote, "the rest was a sun eaten/ walk through the desert/ carrying great bags of/ sand." While in Berkeley in January, 1971 Wantling flashed back momentarily to the fifties:

> Just like back in the 50's only it was 8
> bills for a cap of smack then
> its half that now & better quality & . . .
> I remember how good it feels, so
> good it scares me &
> I run to the death store, pick
> up a quart of white port . . . .

"Heaven's white powder" was, however, hell's black store: by tripping—not journeying, but falling—he fell and that was that was that.

Ultimately, inevitably, Wantling's heroin string-out ran its string, and given the alternatives O.D. or bust, Wantling scored bust: possession in Los Angeles County. Although it was a first offense and he copped a guilty plea, he was somehow burned by a certain "Judge Lynch" who denied proba on and "crammed that 1-14 up my ass." Nobody knows just what happened. Someone dropped a dime/oversnitched/overpled/ oversold/or some crazed four-button-down D.A. crazed to get a rep as "people's defender"/some judge with an impotent bat wouldn't play ball. They iced Wantling for five big ones—February 1958 through September 1964—and that, gentle folk, is a very long-long time.

During this time the first marriage dissolved in spoons of heroin, and incarcerated Wantling lost a wife, a son, a life.

> all the fucken time I was in San Quentin
> I kept remembering my stinking bitch of an old lady
> and how I'd rode the beef for her
> and how she'd stopped writing in 9 months
> and served papers and shacked up with some
> Chicano from East L.A.
> who was a pimp and on parole from Q himself . . .

In prison and freed—relatively—of his habit, Wantling nurtured his political radicalism, his struggle against "The State." His *The 21 Reasons*, dated 1960 and later "smuggled out of San Quentin," is a Hobbesian list of indictments against the state for failing in its obligation to facilitate the ecstasies of life. Because the state murders, it must be destroyed before it destroys. Wantling maintained this position until his own death, and his incarceration in Q, wherein the State deprived him of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, only reinforced beliefs developed in late adolescence. "We are all in San Quentin," he concluded.

The most difficult thing about prison life was not the incarceration, the sexual deprivation or the traffic-jam life, but being locked into a powder keg of hatred and madness where all sorts of bizarre human permutations and personalities were anxious—dying—to express their hatred, violence, and despair. Wantling remembers:

> the rest of us are cons, of course, waiting for
> the Paranoid knife in our backs while the Muslims &
> the Nazis firebomb each other's narrow cells

In *Hunched in Its Belly* he wrote,

> And so it was not the sudden violence of death that had frightened me. What had frightened me beyond my power to comprehend was the meaninglessness, the futility of that violence. One knew that such violence could not purge but could only build toward new and more meaningless violence—until we became as a pack of mad dogs in a cage, one small piece of meat tossed to us by an unseen hand; and a snarling slavering fight to the death with the single victor unable even to eat his prize before he died of his wounds. This was where the horror manifested itself, in the futility of our violence. . . .

I walked into the San Quentin Big Yard on September 21st, 1961, part of a string of fish that had come in from other prisons . . . . There were about twenty-one of us in that fish line, and as we followed the guards across the Big Yard toward fish row, the cons lined up underneath the shed to watch, to whistle, to guffaw and point, the typical San Quentin greeting for

fish. It was a ceremony, unchanged from time immemorial. "That one's mine, she's a cute little cunt, she is. Hey baby, you belong to me." Who doesn't wonder in their minds if the claim hadn't been staked on them, and if the first day in San Quentin hadn't already brought a fight to the death? Only the very old prisoners in the fish line remained unmoved. Some of us looked for the voice of some of the foxier fish and shouted "You might as well fuck me punk, I fucked your Daddy at Soledad." It was a game, but a game with deadly stakes, for one knew if one showed weakness the wolves would pounce and the booty would be divided ten times over before the week was up. So as one walked that long walk to fish row one breathed a sigh of relief when a familiar face was spotted. A friend remembered from another prison, another time, a dopefiend partner from L.A. or a crime-partner from Frisco. "Hey Baby, you finally made it to the Big Time!" "Hey loo, it's Wild Willie!" "Hey Willie, you bring some of that dope from Vacaville?" Yes, one felt relief and no guilt; for all along the fish line the men were eagerly searching the Big Yard for familiar faces, friends spotted, shouts exchanged, and an almost visible sigh of relief went down the line of march. One knew one wasn't alone in one's cowardice, one began to understand that every man on the yard had walked the same gauntlet, and the lucky ones had found their friends before the day was over. The cool eyes on the yard glittered, the men with friends were marked for caution, the loners were checked for visible weakness and marked for further exploitation. The bets were made and the claims were staked, and I felt a power surge through me simply from the fact of having friends. I knew I would survive. The first day was over.

On penal justice, Wantling wrote,

> Can one expect a State employee, a career civil service man, to take into consideration that during the months of November, December, and January the State had scheduled six executions in San Quentin's gas chamber? . . . Five thousand convicts looked up at the State murder chamber every day, five thousand minds mulled over in silence the fact that the State murders mechanically, coldly, obscenely, and the public is not only said to approve, the public is said to breathe a sigh of relief.

Who was this tenuous/monstrous public that reacted so strangely, if the stories in the paper goat were to be believed? Who was it, if not us, here, walking the Big Yard at San Quentin, archetypal representatives of the American public? . . . A cross section, not a fair one perhaps, but perhaps representative victims of this cancerous totalitarian life that will finally kill all of us, you, I, our children and what might have been our child-

ren's children if things had been a little different.

Of course, Wantling might have added another point or two. First, if one was poor, the strange fruit of addiction had to be obtained illegally by terror, force and violence, so it wasn't the strange fruit but its prohibitive price that caused the confrontation. Second, if Wantling had wished to consider all prisoners political prisoners—as well he might—then he should have done so. Third, politics or not, addiction is still a psychosis. Fourth, he might have condemned the State that seemingly despairs about the horror of addiction even as it encourages the horror of war.

(A digression. Here is another of the many ironies of Wantling's life: whereas he could never say no to drugs, he did surmount the prison experience. In a letter dated October 28, 1979 he comments on the rise and raze of Timothy Leary: "Leary's sick again, raving a bit, sold out to violence. I'd almost blame it on the joint and the fucking over he got from almost everybody, but having been thru that bit myself somewhat, I know it's not just that. That kind of shit can be transcended without selling out . . . ." Wantling, who perplexed so many with his own forms of malady and repetitive waste and selling out to drugs was in turn perplexed by Leary's behavior.)

Still, it is impossible that human experience be completely devoid of goodness, beauty, truth and joy. Here in prison, entombed in brick, Wantling added that brightest jewel to his personal crown of crucifixion, poetry. Having nowhere else to go, Wantling took the Lester Young leap into his great and fertile self. Cliches not withstanding, San Quentin walls did not a prison make. For the first time Wantling realized that the ultimate walls were within his mind; prison merely forced him to confront them or die. He lived! He is said to have met a perceptive and humane prison counselor, a certain Crist Lovejieff, who helped Wantling uncover Wantling. Because Wantling could no longer obtain a perverse ego gratification through quasi-glamorous self-destructive fuck-ups among this west coast bush league/tank town peer group of mediocre fuck-ups--remember he was in Q, the Big League of fuck-ups!—he reversed himself. Wantling began to seek ego-gratification through cautious self-construction, scholarship and poetry. (Eldridge Cleaver, in San Quentin about the same time, did much the same thing, as had Caryl Chessman earlier, and George Jackson later.)

Just how much help Lovejieff was is a matter of speculation. In answering one of Wantling's letters he wrote, "To date, Bill, I haven't any evidence of a human, any one of my students at the prison, were importantly influenced by me toward a fuller, riper, saner more reliable, responsible, really creative life. Not ONE!" And he added, "I don't

know, Bill, what it is you want of me, or if in fact I have anything left to give or share." The letter of September 30, 1963 continues: "I have nothing to say to encourage you or discourage you."

Be this all as it may, while incarcerated—away from the streets, from drugs, from petty criminality, from the avarices of addiction—Wantling's literary career burgeoned. In his essay *The Revolution Is To Be Human,* which paid homage to the long-time communist poet Walter Lowenfels (1897-1976), Wantling details how Lowenfels helped him as a poet. While imprisoned and sending out poetry to west coast little magazines, Wantling had some of his poems fall into Lowenfels' hands, and received in return letters of encouragement. Wantling sent poems directly to Lowenfels, who edited, criticized and/or published them in various anthologies. "Walter's suggestions were usually pointed towards cutting, chopping, dealing with the empty place, the holes that can help us state the unstateable and manifest the chimerical," explained Wantling. "I was learning my craft. It wasn't easy." Correspondence from Lowenfels and poet Charles Bukowski provided aesthetic nourishment and aesthetic despair. Wantling might have chosen to leave behind the 50's drugs and the 60's radical politics, which he felt were "too much with him he wanted to relax and forget. But Walter detested that kind of avoidance." A life-long worker for the proletariat, Lowenfels demanded *la literature engage.*

Extant documents suggest Wantling submitted his work all over: to little magazines, to a contest for prison writing judged by Robert Lindner (author of *Rebel Without a Cause,* 1944), even to a San Quentin library brochure. He was also beginning to evolve a credo, an aesthetic, a manifesto for his poetry. In a somewhat ponderous introductory statement to the poetry titled "Silver Apples of the Moon" (submitted to the Lindner competition, February 14, 1963), Wantling stated his belief that his work was "the first conscious fusion of the psychoanlytic school of Freud and Jung—That is, this is the first time that the myth has been confronted by Freudian psychosexual awareness and not lost power in process. In all humility, I believe that I am the first poet since Dylan Thomas to reinforce and strengthen the mythic powers by psychoanalytic awareness."

Here and in a later introduction to the cycle of *14 Cynghanedd Poems* Wantling significantly rejected his "more shallow, prose-poem work" as "not truly poetry at all" and chose instead to immerse himself in neo-Freudianisms and ancient Welsh tradition.

In his "Silver Apples" preface, Wantling went on to say he chose words "not just for their metaphysical meaning, but for their ear appeal, their assonance, consonance and inner rhyme." He noted that he had "irresponsibly" mixed Hinduism, Taoism, Christianity, Theosophy and

the like "while holding true to a central theme—the White Goddess and her son, The Hero." And he concluded thought he had attempted "to show the simultaneous but 'opposite drives' to Eros and Thanatos, undoubtedly I have failed to reach some of my goals, and the only apology I can offer for this is that I am still young and I have not stopped working."

About the same time (May 17, 1963), Wantling wrote a letter to Ed Van Aelstyn, editor of the *Northwest Review*, thanking him for his encouragement. Analysing his own work, Wantling wrote,

> What motivates me is an overwhelming intuitive drive to recapture a certain felt loss, an intuition which tells me that there is some great missing link of love or rhythm or harmony which is blocking a great deal of life-potential for all of us. And I know enough about myself . . . to know that this certain sense of loss is not just an echo of the original sense of Oedipal loss and frustration which art and our attempts to recapture the unattainable in literature. So I am attempting to go back and pick up at the point of loss and broken rhythm. I must pick this up, if possible, and build from there . . . .

Where Van Aelstyn had challenged Wantling's excessive use of the "I" in his poetry, Wantling defended it as a manifestation of his "exceptional egocentricity." If the poetry is good enough, he argued, "it makes no difference, finally, in what person I sing my songs."

In an undated note Wantling offers this amazing confession of his search for an aesthetic:

> Archetype of my time: Scrambling through the prisons, madhouses, hospitals, dark climbing out of deserts to mountains and beaches, I scribbled as I passed by leaving my signal perversion behind me. On the shithouse wall I inscribed my sublime poetry, disappointing those who sat after me seeking pornography. On the finest bond I inscribed obscenities angering the censors who rightly expected beauty and uplifting epigrams. Delighting in the perverse, I took especially perverse delight in disappointing all my audience, frustrating every potential, finally arriving at my goal, the brink of nothingness where, perversely enough, I was finally frustrated.

One thing seems generally agreed upon, however. From Bukowski's I'm-for-me perspective or Lowenfels' I'm-for-you, Wantling's poetry, when it eventually abandoned his street scene for academic gentility and respectability, seemed to lose something in the transmutation, and ended by pleasing neither camp.

(Again irony: Wantling, who professedly had despised formal school-

ing harbored closet longings after the academy—footnotes, parsings, appendices and all! Thus Lowenfel's warning to tell-it-like-it-is, and Bukowski's letter dated 8/6/66:

> Bill, your danger is that you learn about the old lit boys, you might begin to pick up their cloth and work with it. Maybe I'm wrong, but the problem with the college educated writers is that their edges are not rough hardly rough enough to cut through the wire and rust and slime that brought us all to August 1966 a.d.

Wantling himself in an unpublished introduction seemed to reject both Lowenfels and Bukowski, and his own poetry (all done in his prose style, and in his opinion therefore not poetry at all "despite my success with this style"), and instead chose writing Welsh Cynghanedd, which "as a poet, it is my goal to create a sizeable collection of."

Wantling also dreamed of writing a novel. Among other plots he considered one involving the White Panthers in the midst of a great ecstatic/apocalyptic rock festival. Within this framework he planned to depict the mid-1960s flower children: "there are several million of them walking the streets now, boys and girls, kids hopping from commune to commune, from rock festival to riot to jail and back again, just being in the purity of their sweet ecstasy . . . ." Other than what he called his "cock novel" *Young and Tender* and uncompleted excerpts, Wantling was never to write a novel. He attempted various prose bits. His one play was published in *Dramatika,* his critical pieces in various small presses or the Illinois State University campus newspaper, *Vidette.* His fiction or university assignments seem to have found few publishers.

Wantling also tried his hand at editing the small press periodical *Poems of the People.* Its concept was to "serve the underground papers . . . to bridge the gap between small presses and underground newspapers and to dismantle the convention that a poem may appear in only one little magazine of small circulation." The reasoning behind this was two-fold: first, to increase the circulation and impact of poetry considered important to political struggle, and second, to present within the framework of committed literature poetry as "merely" one more commodity produced by and for the ownership of the people. Wantling firmly accepted the public ownership theory and usually went to great—and often, in the sense of career, precarious—lengths to minimize publishers' copyright restrictions on his own works.

During this time his poems were accepted by countless foreign and American little magazines, including *Wormwood Review, Second Coming, Small Press Review, Dustbooks, Falcon, Ole,* and *Input.* This was

a period of high productivity and good receptivity. Wantling attended Cosmep (Committee of Small Magazine Editors and Publishers) conferences in East Lansing (1970) with Len Fulton, and in Buffalo (1971) and Madison, Wisconsin (1972) with his wife, Ruthie, by then a poet herself. Wantling and Ruthie intended to publish their own small press magazine to be called *Pennebarf,* but lack of funds prevented the plan from materializing.

While attending I.S.U. Wantling also increased his political activity, writing for such New Left publications as *The Pre-Dawn Leftist* (Normal) and the *Nola Express* (New Orleans). He also contributed prose columns and poetry to more traditional campus publications, the *Vidette,* the *Quadrangle,* and the *Triangle* (which he also edited), all in the 1967-1970 years. His writings reflect the literary and philosophical influences of Buckminster Fuller, William Burroughs, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Martin Luther King, Jr., and C.S. Lewis. He also admired Camus, Albert Schweitzer's "Reverence for Life," pre-bust Timothy Leary's turn-off/tune-in/drop-out concept, pre-bust Huey Newton's Black Panther philosophy, John Sinclair's White Panther philosophy, and George Orwell's *1984.*

Most of Wantling's success in poetry came in the so-called small presses, the counter-culture, the underground, the Beat/flower people. Among Stateside editors/poets who encouraged Wantling were Hugh Fox, Len Fulton, A.D. Winans, Darlene Fife, Robert Head, Robert Moore, Rich Mangelsdorff, Bukowski, Lowenfels, and James Scrimgeour. For the usual reasons—conservatism, sloth, snobbery, moralism, fear—Wantling received small attention from the academy and the East Coast book/media establishment. In a letter to the *New York Times* (May 3, 1970), Lowenfels attacked this Establishment, charging it was "a literary junta whose rule extends throughout the schools and colleges and white bookshops of the United States." Among those he felt were victims of this publishing conservatism Lowenfels listed Black and Chicano poets Atkins, Sanchez, Savedra, and Welch, and among the whites Bukowski, Cabral, Shechner and Wantling.

Interestingly, Wantling's biggest published success (excluding the more or less American Penguin Books) came in England, Australia, and New Zealand. Trevor Reeves of the latter country published his *San Quentin and Other Poems* at his Caveman Press. Naturally these publications brought little money. Thus Wantling thanked Bob Head and Darlene Fife in a letter written just before departing for the 1971 Cosmep conference at Buffalo: "Wow, $20.00. I feel like a fucken capitalist, you 2 cats are too much, too sweet, OM, PEACE, JOY, we luv you, more money than I've ever made from poetry except the 50 pounds advance money on the British book . . . ."

After the passing of his five high-hard ones, Wantling chose to return to Peoria, there "to freeload and write." Significantly he emerged from his prison experience thinking of himself as a writer. Having entered with the beat, he emerged with the incipient Hippies, having experienced/embraced meanwhile jazzpoetry, the black-white racial amalgam, the open-sex stance, the Red-dead wrestle, the peace-war/East-West/soft-hard drug things. He must also have internalized peyote, Zen, Tao, Ginsberg, Kerouac, Snyder, R&B, C&W, R&R.

The second return home did not work out quite as he'd hoped. The town was still too square for Wantling, too severe, too subterranean, too much behind lace curtains. But why fault Peoria, or any burgh used to its burgher madness, burgher meanness, burgher chauvinisms? The whole planet is but one cloying mass of burghers! Even Wantling must have known much of the fault lay somewhere within his wild and raging self, a self so driven, so intolerable, that no town, no megalopolis, no place on the planet itself could tolerate it. So Wantling planned to split.

But before he left, by chance or fate, Wantling again met Ruth Ann, now Burton-nee Cooper, former intermittant high school kidstuff paramour and now divorced mother of two sons. They met again at the Santa Claus parade in Peoria, Christmas of 1962, and they talked. She surprised him by being familiar with Camus' *The Stranger.* Wantling visited her. By then Wantling had commenced his fluttery physical mannerisms of tics, shimmers, squints, squirmings, shiftings, sudden standings, abrupt twists, turns and always—like Louie Armstrong—handkerchief in hand—wiping his face, nose, mouth, like some afflicted son of Lady MacBeth seeking to spew away a long forgotten yet still burning stain. Ruthie was so perplexed by these almost stylized rhythmic motions that she asked Wantling if they were part of some strange religious ritual. Wantling laughingly answered "yes." They married. On April 18, 1964 and with two sons from her prior marriage they chose to live in the Peoria area for what was to be—not the rest, no, the duration of his life—or more precisely the next ten years.

One can only surmise the menial and mind-mangling jobs Wantling held during this sometimes joyous, sometimes bizarre, always economically grim period. He returned to the same farm equipment company that had employed his father; then he worked in a carwash, as a veternarian aide (for two days), in an engineering company and at the Peoria Zoo. It came to pass finally after push had shoved them sufficiently that, with Ruthie's fullest encouragement and work-to-support, Wantling decided to utilize his Korean G.I. benefits and attend I.S.U. at Normal, 40 miles from Peoria. (Like many artists he envisioned academe as the monastic/Medicis of the time and sought refuge there.) So, with wife, hope, dogs, cats, children and all, in the summer of '66, this he did.

Wantling, Ruthie, and the drug-distended family lived in or near Normal from late 1966 until his death in 1974. Supported by Ruthie, his own jobs, and his G.I. funding, Wantling was eventually able to earn a B.A. and an M.A. from Illinois State.

In some respects it was a good town for Wantling. Like any college town, Normal had its share of fringe freaks, heads, aging beats and similar outre-culture beings. It was, in part at least, Wantling's milieu. On the other hand, it might have been a bad town for precisely those reasons. Freaks and heads live and let live. They encourage outrageous, existential behavior. But worse for Wantling, where burghers repress and incarcerate, freaks stand back—or worse, they feed ghoulishly off outlaw behavior. Thus there was always somebody anxious to give Wantling a score: drugs, admiration, respect, envy, pity, and/or whatever sado/masochistic trip in which he felt the urge to indulge. In this town he was The Poet! ("I introduce myself as the greatest living poet in Normal, Illinois . . . .") Given Wantling's alky/chemical demands and his questionable will-power, this college town with the ironic name may well have been an adversity. For heads and straights alike, Wantling became Normal's greatest living soap opera. Drugs were, as usual, the root of the problem– and in its wake, decay and death.

In his poem "I Wake Up Under a Fig Tree," Wantling acknowledges his debasement:

> 5 days later I've puked on everybody's rug
> shit in Jackie's bathtub
> ripped off people I love . . .

"Knowing Bill Wantling was a very emotionally wrenching experience," recalls his friend and attorney Art Greenberg. "The first thing he did when he walked in your house was gulp down everything in the medicine cabinet. I mean everything. If you knew he was coming, you would hide it all, but he'd go through your drawers. There was nothing you could do." In Normal Wantling was arrested in 1966 for possession of codein (usually an over-the-counter cough medicine, but not to Wantling). This bust elicited sympathetic letters from poets Doug Blazek, Kirby Congdon and Charles Bukowski. "Sorry on the codein," Bukowski wrote in a letter of August 21, 1966, "but Why don't they leave you alone? If they keep smashing you for infinitesmals they are going to pay—for destroying a human being, Grade A or the human being will be driven against them—all at once!!! like the kid in the towers of the Texas University."

Wantling explained his drug need thus:

> I need a reason to lush it up
> you always need a reason

can't have the world strung on my
finger like a yo-yo
so I'll blot the mother fucker O-U-T

In his poem "Initiation" he wrote,

the void screamed down upon me
clutched me we were one
carried us up, up above the sun
into the no-longer dying
light, ah the light

why should I return?

Wantling's life was one massive miscalculation. He miscalculated the importance of his poet's inviolability. He miscalculated the devastation of drugs. And unfortunately in dire karmic consequences thereof, he miscalculated the Aquarian vision of the Sixties. The first left him mute, the second killed him. The third helped maim the Aquarian beatitudes. Like Timothy Leary, Wantling exaggerated the positive effects of drugs, and when the negative came down, it came down hard and on so many and with irrevocable finality (and it is coming down still). Drug-dewy-eyed, Wantling reworked a taped 1965 lecture of Leary's, envisioning acid-trippers as producers of "nothing less than the speedy evolution of new indigenous religion . . . who, like it or not . . . are going to build you a new civilization."

Zaffari, who'd known Wantling since 1966 when they met at an I.S.U. "Free University" session, adamantly asserts much of Wantling's last years were spent in the unrelenting pursuit of ruthless (ironic pun) scoring: codeine, wine, grass, hash, what-ever-the-fucken-ever! He reduced those who loved him to chemical pimps and puke-wipers. Seemingly he doubted himself loved, then decided to test the affections of others through his drugged excesses. When cared for he would be reassured—until the next time. In the last stages neither he nor those who loved him could do other than assist in his hurtle to death: to assist was to assasinate, yet to refuse was accounted to withhold love. Moreover, Wantling seems to view his psychic malignancies as mythic, glamorous, artsy-cutsie. In the poem "Compassion, You Know All Poets Got It" he took pride in the fact that regardless of how boorish he'd been, he remained loved: "she hated me because she couldn't stop loving me."

"Wantling squandered those around him as he wasted himself and his art," observed Robert Moore. Unfortunately Wantling misinterpreted decay for adventure and glamour and romance, and became monstrous to wives, children, enemies, friends, Zaffari, Ruthie, others. This the man who, in his right mind, was the most compassionate of men!

Wantling often sketched the bouncing ball of own life: excited, he had to get higher, higher, higher—some drugged Icarus—then he'd crash

into something invisible, be transformed into a maimed monster—heal
then up again! In an excerpt from an unpublished novel, Wantling, in
the alter-ergo of Lyman Francis Garrity, experiences a Be-in:

> . . . it took his breath away. He dropped another tab of sunshine . . . washed it down with the Ripple wine a girl on his left was passing. The energy level was becoming fantastic. Peaking, Peaking . . . Lyman was drawn into the sheer power of it. His defenses crumpled. Someone was speaking to him from a great distance, a long time away. It was God. The light was coming, coming in soundless thundering waves and he rolled over and covered his head with his arms. He moaned. He trembled. He was not worthy of meeting God face to face.
>
> The people on the blanket took his arms. Molly ran her hands through his hair, crooning to him. The boy on his left held his hand, the boy on his right rubbed his shoulder blades.
>
> —It's all right. It's all right. Everything's all right. All things are good. All is well . . .
>
> He said something. When they didn't understand him his eyes changed. Who is this? I don't know her! What are they doing to me? O God . . . Fear. Panic. Then the music came in. From the stage. They were rubbing his hands, his face, his body. Talking to him. Crooning. Laughing softly. They loved him. He could feel it. It was good. All manner of things were good. All would be well.

Somehow when Wantling was caught up in his madness, caught up in this drug thing, shit didn't stink—not his, not anyone's. In an unpublished work tentatively titled *Excerpt,* which Wantling may have intend
ed to be his long anticipated rock-ecstasy novel, he described a Woodstock-like festival in all its squallor, communality, and beauty. Here is Bill Wantling's own life. As Lyman Kelso, Wantling first lauds the com
munal care and concern for all and by all. By ironically intoning many times "How Youth Go Wrong" he condemns his adult straight world for their hatred, greed, and fear, fear, fear. Then Kelso describes the scene:

> A chicken farmer from the mountains was on stage, Janis Joplin had just finished Summertime, her voice cracked, broken. The chicken farmer was rapping how nobody had to eat meat, how eating meat was murder. He raised 10,000 chickens for eggs and had hardboiled an entire week's production. He had his sons and cousins going through the crowd, handing hardboiled eggs out of canvas bags slung over their shoulders like newsboys. All his relatives had long black beards like the chicken farmer. Naked to the waist, their great hairy bellies shining with sweat in the Georgia sun. They all wore peaked black hats. They looked like a hillbilly comic strip from the 1930's.

In the fragment's last scene, Wantling transcends this world entirely and stands poised on the verge of the next:

> Someone in a white toga came up to their blanket. —Hi Man. Hi! We're all free. Beautiful. One. Et-fuckin-Cetera!
>
> He gestured to the clouds, reciting his poetry. He scratched himself, lifting his toga to his waist scratching, took it off, gesturing.
>
> Walk freely. Naked. Picking belly button lint. Suck each other . . . . He walked off, naked, picking belly button lint. his toga lay on the grass before the blanket. Lyman picked it up, put it on. Took it off. Took off his tie-died shirt, his bell-bottoms, his shoes and socks. Put the toga back on. It smelled like pigshit. Lyman smiled. Everyone on the blanket smiled, smiling into his eyes. Silence. Then they all began clapping; laughing. Someone passed the Ripple. Lyman laughed, peaking.

But. But as there are no royal roads to geometry, there are no short cuts to supra-consciousness. Nirvana on drugs is like flying with one's arms: Wantling flew for a while, but fell finally to earth and paid for his flight with his life.

Zaffiri recalls Wantling during this time:

> Although he embraced a philosophy of classic humanism, a strong affinity for all living things, he was capable of great callousness in his relationship with individuals.
>
> To understand Bill's relationship with other people, you would have to understand that most of Bill's life was spent in a constant search for things which would get him drunk or high. There were periods in his life when he was sober, but for the most part he moved around under the cloud of one or another form of intoxication. Against the background of this habitual drunkeness, it seems incredible that he was ever able to write poetry.
>
> To acquire the booze and drugs he required and the money to buy them, Bill became one of the best con men I have ever seen. Not the traditional con man (flashy dresser, fast talker). No, he was smarter than that. So good was he at it, in fact, that the people he took seldom realized it. He was a manipulator and all with whom he came in contact, whether best friend or casual acquaintance, were game for his wiles. He wheedled, begged, lied, and even stole from people to get the things he required to get stoned. Bill was the worst sort of rip-off and the only reason many of his actions were tolerated around Bloomington-Normal was that he was a poet, of celebrity status, and could there commit acts not tolerable from anyone else.

Wantling's personal political radicalism surely came in part from his own bitter burn when, due to his own (excusable) youthful madness

coupled with the (inexcusable) adult madness of his jingoistic high school elders, he found himself a gladiator thrown into an imperialist geo-coliseum, the spirit of the times, and his own profound love of human liberty converted Wantling to the New Left, a commitment reflected in many of his poems. "On the 7th Day" invites,

> Hey girl, hey boy
> let us topple walls, let us free the children of the
> night . . . all guerilla children,
> hip echelon. we near the time of joyous feast

Occasionally he espoused terrorism and violence, as in "The Weapons":

> We melted down the quarters &
> cast silver bullets in the sand &
> snuck into their homes and shot them.

He explored the political effectiveness of force and violence in several of the columns he wrote for the *Vidette*. On August 2, 1967 he wrote,

> It's been a short summer. A little sun, a little swimming, a few laughs, a lot of studying. Your condition, my condition, our condition. There are other conditions too, some of them not so simple or isolated. People still die, die much too soon and without having really lived. Children, women, young men. The history of our century has been that of one continuous war with short rests between them, a sort of breathing space.
>
> . . .
>
> So yes, fine—if this is the universal condition, I'll swing with it, enjoy the grapes. But I'll also insist on drawing the line. The line is right here; where children still suffer and die, where the good things of this earth are used up and destroyed in a senseless conflict that may very well outlast our century; where another human being subject to the same condition as I has the ignorant bad taste to try and tell me what I can and can't do within the limits of my human condition, where I can go and can't go, whom I can and can't associate with. And I can only hope others will be drawing that same line. The only way to be free is to act as if you were already free.
>
> . . .
>
> There is a tendency to forget—to forget we are in a cage, and to forget there are others for whom the cage is so excruciatingly torturous they cannot forget. To be aware is to recognize the cage for what it is, and to always seek an exit. For ourselves. For all others.

On April 23, 1968 he wrote of Martin Luther King, Jr,

> We knew he was destined for martyrdom. His comparison to Gandhi was all too obvious, and we have seen what happens in this country when someone tries to bring us up to the real events

of our time—we have seen, for example, the murders of Abraham Lincoln and Jack Kennedy.

But we had hoped he would be given a few more years, two perhaps, to do in the United States what Gandhi did for India. The timing was crucial, critical, not only for Martin Luther King and the Pacifist movement, but for the forces of murder, destruction, and violence. The moment of critical mass had been reached, and it is only seemingly absurd that this man, the youngest Nobel prize-winner in history, was shot down while protesting for the garbage workers of Memphis, Tenn.

He did not get his two years, and all the convocations of public tears, all the hypocritical reflections on the man's greatness now that he was safely dead, all the appeals by President and Senate in their attempts to act, all these things will not now prevent nor forestall the violence.

Chicago will burn this summer, and burn as near to the ground as stone and steel permit. Chicago, and Newark, and Baltimore, and perhaps Kansas City.

Wherever the ghetto is confronted by the political machine in all its pompous obscenity, that city will burn. Wherever, as in Chicago, the Mafiosa and its beautifully functioning machine has elected greedy local government of insane power; wherever, as in our Chicago, the mayor is so obviously cretin and submoral as to think police power will put an end to riots and the way to stop social protest is with guns and gas; wherever, as in Chicago, Newark, Kansas City, and Baltimore these things occur, the city that permits their existence will burn, and will burn to the ground. The core of life cannot be cheated.

Wantling could be violent. Once, triggered by whatever high—the loss of a dime, the symbolic confrontation with the bitch-state—he trashed a telephone booth. The judge, doubtless having once lacked a dime for a soda pop or a phone call or a coin toilet, sympathized. Essentially, however, Wantling was too kindly, too gentle, too sweet a person to advocate terrorism, blood, death. Instead he eschewed violence for what might be termed the world evolution.

(Wantling died believing in it. Unlike too many pseudo-proletarian artists who give lip-service to the people but covet their aesthetic and psychic capital gains as avariciously as any Wall Street banker, Wantling decreed his poems be printed without copyright forever. It was his way of returning to the people things he felt belonged—directly or indirectly —to the people. If he grabbed, he also gave, unlike a whole lot of other bankers, poets, writers, gangsters and extremely certified extremely non-public accountants.)

With the rest of the nation, Wantling went dove and went dove hard during the mid-1960s. In a prose-poem letter to Robert Head and Dar-

lene Fife dated September 3, 1970, Wantling stated that although he knew, understood, appreciated certain factions of the New Left calling for violence, even though he knew he would

> be one of the first to swing from a lampost
> if the Revolution comes off
> Yet I can no more condone a world of bombings
> of counter-revolutionary execution lists
> Than I can condone the world of the Establishment

Within academe he found kindred activist spirits, youths with whom he could share his own eternally youthful ideas of love and truth and beauty, and a forum. To the counter-culture hippie-yippie left he was an existential figure who commanded respect. He was a converted Macho Marine vet of a previous Cold War police action. He'd been busted. He had been—since all are—a political prisoner. He'd done time. He did drugs. He was a poet. And he was a hard-driving, high-stepping, free-wheeling activist. He was a Big Man on the Campus. He took part in demonstrations for peace, for drugs, for freedom, for love. He took part in the local literary/poster/pamphlet outlets. He worked and hung out around the campus communes, co-ops, headshops. He worked. In one of his great love poems, Wantling imagined pointing to this planet, this spaceship Earth and saying,

> —There's our body
> now
> love it or leave it
> nows our last chance

In many obvious ways Wantling's New Left perspective on politics was more immersed in the religious/moral/ethical than in wardheeler/tenderloin/porkbarrel/political plum realities. In this he reflects his era: Zen, Hare Krishna, Buddha, reincarnation, Karma, and the mystical body of Christ. In a March, 1971 poem, Wantling wondered of mad, befuddled humanity, "in 3 million generations, how come we stay so dumb?"

He concludes the same poem ("Satori Against Mystical Insight"):

> We are all pigs we are all niggers
> We are all Krishna—All
> We are All—Enjoy it!
>
> All . . .

In another poem, written in the spring of 1971, Wantling combines his erotic tantric politics with the implicit magical mystery mandala AUM:

> I
> lust, want
> to lick her honey cup of gold & brown

melt it with my tongue
    ripple
    rip
O Chocolate Ah

In a February, 1971 poem Wantling touches on the madness of men who do madness in spite of the supra-undeniably ephemeral world transience which thwart all their maddened efforts to concretize. It ends with

(Pat) Garrett, firing rapidly
                —Krishna
scream the Pits, firing rapidly
                into the air
into thin air . . .

And since all ends in this thin air, Wantling preached peace, joy, love:

Light . . .
    Leer . . .
    God . . .
it all swings, doesn't it?

There was this wondrously cosmic/cornicopeic/religious aura in the Acquarian sweet air at the time, and for those who lived through it and dug it, it was a blessed moment of hope. Of course Wantling dug it. In many ways Wantling helped it come to pass. As early as 1959, among his prison notes are studies investigating drugs, and notes concerning a "new savior girl" who was to appear at the time of his death—5/5/2000 and for whom he was a "forerunner." He quotes a speech of Christ:

> And the man who bears the pitcher will walk forth across an arc of Heaven; the sign & signet of the Son of Man will stand forth in the Eastern sky. The wise will then lift up their heads & know that the redemption of the earth is near.

With the optimism of a Magus he added, "the Piscean synod of 2100+ year passes into the Acquarian Synod and the Girl savior must come." In another early (1959?) poem he wrote, "I know that all men must find their Godhood/ before i completely realize mine."

In spite of Wantling's various drug-related hassles, his college days were on the whole pleasant. He did receive two degrees, he was on the whole an excellent student, he was a local literary lion, he won fellowships and finally an instructorship in the English department. The then chairman Dr. William Linneman could not have been more sympathetic and understanding, or more reinforcing. Linneman recalled,

> Bill started college at the significant age of thirty-three, and I had heard of him from other instructors before he ever enrolled in my class. They had described his writing ability, his wide knowledge of contemporary literature, and had given me some of his poems

to read . . . . He would come bustling into class with a great stride, swinging an attache case, not tardy, but hurrying because of his nervous energy. It took him several minutes to prepare for for class. He would open the attache case, take out texts and notebooks, set aside his lunch, sometimes hook up a tape recorder, and once in a while make an arrangement of mysterious little brown and white bottles on his desk. It was a show, and the rest of the class enjoyed it. They stopped their chatting, smiled at one another and winked.

For some reason, it seemed that Bill sweated a lot, especially on Fridays; then he would bind up his forehead with a bandana. It was difficult for him to sit still for the hour, and he was constantly moving and shifting in his chair. It was a large class and there was very little opportunity for student questions . . . . However, Bill wanted to be a participant, and if I made it difficult for him to ask questions, he made his input in other ways. Every once in a while, by paraphrasing the words of an author, such as Thoreau or Melville or Whitman or Twain or Frost or Jeffers, I would launch into a tirade about American society. "Yeah," Bill would audibly sigh; "Go man, go." (This was before "right on.") The rest of the class would snicker; it was like the "amen" corner of the Methodist Church. . . .

Everyone, of course, is subject to envy and pride, and literary people perhaps more so than others. Bill seemed to possess less of these commodities than any other literary person I have known. He was a constant source of encouragement for the younger students who were trying to write: criticizing their works and appraising them of little magazines and underground publications which might receive their efforts. During the semester he was in my class, the student newspaper began to run a series of poetry, well, not poetry, barely rimed prose, by someone who obviously was a close friend of the editor. The English students who were writers began to object: they had thrown away better stuff in the seventh grade. In fact, they had a meeting to see what pressure could be put on the newspaper to stop publishing the doggerel. Bill got up and spoke: he pointed out that what was really important was that the writer was trying. She ought to be encouraged, and the rest of them should stop their complaining and see if they could do better. He immediately turned the movement from carping to creativity, and scores of students began to produce verse, so much that the newspaper had to run regular poetic supplements. More good student poetry was written that year on campus than ever had been before and Bill Wantling alone was responsible. I told a dean some time later that Bill ought to be paid just to stay around.

Sam Zaffiri, probably his closest compatriot at Normal, similarly attest-

ed to Wantling's patience as a teacher:

> And yet as if to counteract and balance this, Bill was likewise capable of extraordinary kindness and decency in his dealings with people. I found him unusual as a poet in that he seldom played those character-assassination games backbiting poets play on each other. I don't ever recall a time he criticized another's poetry. Those fifty or so poets in the area who made pilgrimages always left heaped with praise and certain they were to be the next Wallace Stevens. This may have not been sound criticism and I doubt if Bill helped many people become better poets, but when given the situation, Bill inevitably chose kindness over truth.

During this period (1971-74), while struggling to maintain himself and his family with various straight jobs, maintain himself as a student, as a poet, as a human being, he continued to spin off into various drug and emotional binges. He hitched a ride to Monterey to see his alleged baby daughter, born to a certain Anne of Arkansas. He hitched again after a blast-argument with Ruthie, who recalled the trip thus:

It was only June—but Aug hot
the yards gone brown
birds flying little as possible
worms gone deep
No was mad—had a few pills
a few bottles of wine
making the day & his head hotter.

"Take me to Lake Evergreen & I'll leave you alone."

He was sawing a frozen pg. of hamburger
burning grease in the skillet;
spitting on the floor

"Come on, I'll take you to Lake Evergreen."

"And when we get there I've got something to tell you bitch"

The day was too hot—he was too angry.
We weren't living together.
What could he tell me that would make any difference.

At Lake Evergreen I threw his sleeping bag out the car window
and he yelled "Wait a min. I've got something to tell you.
Remember when I went to Berkeley? Well I went to Berkeley to
see Ann who had my baby daughter—Fuck you bitch."

He walked toward the lake.
I drove away—
got something to tell you
to tell you
to tell you

Wantling remembered the same events this way:

Poets are sensitive
have compassion, are
tender with their lovers
because we, of all the maddened crowd
understand . . .
like, for 7 years
we fucked over each other in the usual ways
we became experts
until after 7 years we both had black
belts in mental karate
example: for my
37th birthday
she flew to Mexico City & had my baby
scraped out of her belly &
6 months later, for our 7th anniversary
I made certain she had to hustle
a thousand dollars
to bail me out of the county jail
O we had our black belts, both of us
3 days after Mexico City she walked in &
I was drunk, stoned & speeding, leaning
over the icebox spilling lunchmeat & milk
on her clean kitchen floor
she kicked me in the shins, tried for the
head & nuts
I broke her nose & hitched out to
Berkeley to see the girl that'd just had my
baby daughter . . .

Sure, I came back
the girl was young, didnt know how
to fight, hadnt even begun to work on
her brown belt yet

Wantling's life was not constantly frenetic. There were great moments of sweet peace and gentle joy: he loved all living things. At one time he and Ruthie raised mice (one named Haiku) just for the fun of it. Always there were dogs, cats. The last pets he was to know were the dogs Bo and Schoene, and the cat he named Cricket. He wrote a poem to commemorate the death of one pet dog, Bambi. In "I Get On My Bicycle" he speaks of the sweet and fragile joys of being human: "& before I even get to Dealer's I'm hi." (Alas, it cannot go unremarked that where for most of us that sweetness would have sufficed, Wantling—the emotional gourmand/pauper—continued on to Dealer.)

At times, Wantling was among the roughest of men. His cohort, Zaffiri (mentioned or alluded to in many poems) remembers his outrageous dress, his implacable drug need, his occasional pub-crawling forays in search of brawls, and his betrayal testing of kinship through score-mad cunning; conning, coniving, filth and petty thievery.

Wantling suffered in his relationships with women as they, indeed, suffered with him. There were those infidelities, miscarriages, abortions, scrapings. As noted, in the winter of '70 he traveled to Monterey to search for this particular Anne of Arkansas and his presumed baby daughter. Leaving Ruthie was foolish, human, audacious—and something many of us, given the circumstances and the passion, would just as surely and unwisely have done. In a letter from Monterey of November 23, he wrote to Ruthie, "perhaps for the first time in my life I felt into the world and not a stranger on it." He may have been difficult, brutal, immature, brilliant, tender, nasty, calculating, sensitive (once Ruthie and he wept remorsefully after he'd killed a wasp), but he was never bland, boring, dull.

Wantling held a certain allure for certain women. Anne, for example, had invited Wantling to be her lover because she wanted to have the child of a poet. From the first, when Wantling was taken with Ruthie, he had been a helacious husband, father, friend, lover. As early as late December, 1963, while Wantling was in some hospital drying out, he showed great tenderness and encouragement to Ruthie, who had written him one of her first poems. He answered with his own love poem (dated 1/7/64) as well as a gentle critique of Ruthie's.

Ruthie remembered the time of her miscarriage of Wantling's child:

> He brought me these roses—every Friday he brought me one fresh red rose. We figured I got pregnant on a Friday and it worked out good cause he got paid on Friday. So every Friday night he'd bring the rose. Sometimes they'd be buds and sometimes he'd bring a fuller bloom—but mostly they would be beautiful buds. I never got to expecting the roses. I was always genuinely surprised & didn't really know why he was bringing me a rose every Friday.
>
> Sometimes he would vomit right after giving me the rose. He would be sick and drink some codeine and then go vomit. But he would always give me the rose. Sometimes he would write a little note to go with the rose. I liked the notes more than the roses. Sometimes they would be little poems. He would stagger and fall down after I read the poem. He would fall and I'd worry that he hurt himself—but he never did.
>
> Oh, sometimes he would take me out to dinner even though we didn't have much money. We wouldn't go fancy but it was fun to go out with him cause I liked people to see what a handsome

man I was with. Sometimes he would go driving to a liquor store after we went out to eat & had laughed. He would take me home & I'd feed the dogs while he said he was going to get beer. He would wreck the car then. He wrecked 3 cars all the same way.

Sometimes he would rub my back and I'd get turned on—he couldn't make it cause he had too much to drink or he had taken codeine to kill the pain. I never knew what pain.

The baby died—Too many roses, the Dr. said. You ate too many roses.

There were other women as well. His poem "The Great American Novel" records love-making with "this tall chick with her Lil Abner Long Sam body and ass-length dark red hair." Wantling had introduced himself as "the greatest living poet of Normal, Illinois."

> "the great american novel"
>
> —for chas bukowski
>
> I'd been pounding the underworld all night, sulking for the lovely whore of words the nose-flute of words the kettledrum reverberating of them in yr mind yr ears yr groin & belly & finally sulking for their uselessness their inadequacy . . . & Bobby Frink came by & drove me to the Pizza Hut & bought me beers beers beers & it was 12:30 closing time & while walking home slow just staring at the maniac rose-full moon I saw this tall chick with her Lil Abner Long Sam body & ass-length dark red hair . . . I introduced myself as the greatest living poet of Normal Illinois & she'd heard about me cause its always in the local papers how I'm in jail for narcotics or assault or for trashing telephone booths that steal yr last dime—it gets around . . . we end up in her bathtub doing all these nice slippery things & then something special & juicy with her strawberry glycerine soap & it was one of the good nights the fine nights, a night that comes along once in a while when you can take off yr mask & just freak all night without talking . . . shit, you have to have a night like that sometimes or its all a drag a mask a role, a Big Rig truckstop with lukewarm showers & bad hamburgers . . . but then it was Thursday morning & I fell asleep just as her old man came in—I told him how Bad I was but he kicked my ass anyway—well all I really wanted to say was how some of us die screaming some howling with laughter some just rotting away in the arms of that Bitch-Death State . . . I want to try it all before I go & if you think that strawberry soap wasnt worth a crack on the jaw then yr rotting away already . . .

In his dress, Wantling often enjoyed the hip couture (at the time, bell bottoms, earrings, tank shirts, headbands, beads), partly from the free-wheeling joy, partly from high-junk politics. Again, like so many truly

intelligent persons disheartened by the abuses of bogus-intellectuals, Wantling often feigned a role of boorish illiteracy. In fact his readings a and scholarship were extensive, ranging from Blake and Emerson to geo-politics, C.S. Lewis and Eastern religions. Among the last books Wantling read (and, judging from the markings, one which had a strong impact on him) was *The Unquiet Grave,* by Palinurus (Cyril Connoly). This collection of the musings of a sophisticated and sensitive gentle man he much underlined. Perhaps the most poignant and prophetic of all the marked passages that caught Wantling's eye-spirit was:

> approaching forty, I am about to heave my carcass of vanity, boredom, guilt and remorse into another decade.

And so he did, but not for the anticipated decade.

Although he had an obvious need of street-people, Wantling could and did function well enough in academe. He earned two degrees and several scholastic honors. He was elected to *Who's Who in American Colleges and Universities* in 1968, shared the 1968 Story magazine writers award, won the Hart Crane Memorial Foundation Poetry Award in 1969, was elected to the *International Who's Who in Poets,* 1969-71, and earned an EPDA Fellowship at Illinois State University, 1971-73.

Such academic recognition must have been a source of both pleasure and dismay. Pleasure in that he—the drop-out, the junkie, the ex-con—had come back to the halls of academe. Dismay in that college represented the straight world or worse—one more vehicle for the oppression of Wantling's street brothers, sisters, self.

But he plodded on, dulling both the pleasure and the pain with drugs. Thus emerged the drugged Walter Mitty Wantling. Like all of us, Wantling had massive tendencies to romanticize himself, his episodes, his interludes and capers. He lived for them; he died for them. It was all a full tilt/yellow brick road/boogie—give them a good show, make a good looking corpse, give them a run for their money, their mourning, their roses. Wantling seemed to do everything for publication. He became his own p.r. man, his own gossip columnist. It was almost as if one half of him ran around half-crazed so that the other part could have something about which to write, record, anthologize, romanticize, mythologize.

Nature, however, would not talk turkey—at least not forever. Wantling's continued abuse of his body was called to the proverbial screeching halt by natural law: Wantling—beloved college student, junkie, hippie-freak, poet, father—found himself suddenly mortally de-mythologized by his own death. His death proved his mortality, his mortality destroyed his myth.

Only the de-mythologizing remained—that and a few poems. It is all

that he gave himself.

Consciously or otherwise, Wantling began to see himself in mythic, larger-than-life terms. Notes from as early as his prison days reveal that Wantling made close studies of Joseph Campbell, Robert Graves, C. Kerenyi and similar scholars of mythology. In ways both symbolic and poignantly pathetic, Wantling saw himself as an Icarus who sought to fly too high. Half Humpty Dumpty and half Icarus, he fell. Even the struggle upward was agony, so he lived and he died in agony. Notes assumed to have been compiled in San Quentin reflect this self-image. For example, he underlined the statement (attributed to Campbell?) that "every mythological theme of the past that is not transmuted into poetry (poetic truth) is doomed to become simply a provincial relic." Something (probably from Kerenyi) that likely sirened his psyche long after he even consciously remembered it was "mythology, like the severed head of Orpheus, goes on singing even in death and from afar." He might have presumed himself this drug-beheaded Orpheus, and seen himself as this poet from afar still singing through the eternally sweet lips of an eternally sweet youth. In another note, Wantling quotes Campbell's "monomyth": (1) separation or departure, (2) trials, and (3) return and reintegration. Unfortunately, not all heroes—even those in quest of the Holy Grail, the Golden Fleece—are able to return and reintegrate.

Wantling was often an outpatient at Normal's mental hospital, being treated during its 9-5 office hours and then returning home for the evening. But none of it, not the so-called good or the so-called bad times, sufficed. In August 1972 he said of his life,

> to tell it like it is now, I couldn't be
> much worse off back on the bricks with
> a habit ten yards long & all alone . . .

Of course he contemplated suicide. In a letter of October 28, 1970 to writer Claude Pelieu, he wrote,

> We're down to our last 35 cents & Ruthie's seriously considering a divorce, if she can borrow the money for a lawyer somewhere. She's sick of my drug and wino bullshit, & I don't blame her. I'm a drag to myself even & that's the final narcissistic blow. I went to bed with gallons of white port for six weeks but just got further and further depressed. I wanted to end the entire fucking stupid mess but just I'm a coward, chickenshit to draw the razor blade. Can't stand blood anymore, especially my own. So I checked into a clinic, they got me out of bed with some anti-depression medication. I can't stand it. The same old chemical whirlpool bullshit . . . but at least I'm on my feet, getting back to the typewriter. You have the undeserved honor of getting one

of my first letters in the past few months. greetings from the grave, baby. it's cold

After a while, people got tired of pulling him "back from the cliff-edge" and gave him his wish—"let you sail on over next time." He got what the Icarian he—or those demons who possessed him—wanted. "Let me fly, man, fuck it, a grand free fall before the smash." It wasn't very free, and at the last it wasn't even very noble or mythic—just one man covered in shit, heart pounding too hard, eyes crudded like stale glazed doughnuts, and his body, one more time, getting ready to eject his soul from the premises, his body rasping, fuck it, baby, his body shrieking—if you can forget, baby, don't worry 'bout me—and if you think it sounds like Puccini and pressed roses and the poet immersed in camillas you shouldn'a hadna oughta been there.

For whatever reasons (and drugs were not the entire answer), Wantling hit a period of stagnancy in his last years. Probably academe had more of an impact on his personal and creative life than was readily apparent. Perhaps—imagining himself surrounded by scholarship, hoary old names, the timeless tradition, certain courteous and courtly colleagues—Wantling, as when in prison, found another way to gracefully and graciously express himself. His last work, *7 on Style*, reflected a creative amalgam of poetry and scholarship.

Early on he had freely translated Pablo Neruda. He had written a scholarly play depicting Voltaire, Macchiavelli and Rousseau. His writings on William Blake and translations of Neruda reflect a more scholarly mind than "the blood turned to puke . . . cracking with shrieks and static." In "Style 2," Wantling observes of his own poetic work, "I've achieved a certain academic detachment and aplomb/my colleagues, now, are more impressed/the universe much less." In "Style 3" (written December 1973), Wantling quotes the Bukowski letter of June 28, 1969: "What the hell have you been doing to yourself, man? this stuff is very thin. Since you've been going through this college thing, babe, your writing has changed, softened, and it was never really great . . . ." It took courage to acknowledge what must have hurt. Perhaps had Wantling lived, some good would have come of the criticism—and the acknowledgment.

Pushed by Sam Zaffiri, Wantling wrote only one novel, *Young and Tender,* a pornographic potboiler Wantling wrote after he learned that a mutual friend was earning some right-nice-loose change churning out sexual slops. Wantling never did write the novel he'd hoped to write. His wife stated that Wantling was always saying he wanted his first novel to be comparable to Camus' *The Stranger.* His output in novels amounted to *Young and Tender* (which critics Rich Mangelsdorff and Tom McNamara believe incorporates a Charles Bukowski-esque charac-

tor, Gamowski), a novel-in-progress (never completed) titled *Hunched in Its Belly* (1968), and a poem ironically titled "The Great American Novel," as if to imply that since he would never write his novel this would have to do.

Disappointment with this work helped kill him, this and his disappointment in the failure of his second marriage (after nearly ten years, in March 1974 Ruthie had filed for divorce and they were living apart), disappointment over the indifference of Anne and her baby daughter, disappointment at the impending loss of his college teaching position.

He really liked that job! Simply missed too many classes, blew it, knew it. 'Twasn't an angry god or killer angels or fallen apes; he could point only at himself. Perhaps that disappointed him most of all.

Throughout the last years he continued to receive Cassandra-esque letters from Bukowski, Len Fulton, Al Winans, Doug Blazek. Fuck off drugs, man! Wantling would shrug, "no way." In a letter dated April 22, 1966, Blazek wrote, "If I was 10 years older and not one lb. heavier I would personally perform a little judo lobotomy on you gently to persuade you that you don't need drugs . . . ." On March 14, 1974, less than a month before Wantling's death, West Coast poet Al Winans wrote, "and hang in there. You know as well as I do that drugs/alcohol is only another form of suicide only far slower & less merciful in the long run . . . ."

Still, Wantling's life was Wantling's life. And much of it was a desperate struggle for balance against slipping over the edge into oblivion, insanity, madness, death. In "The Head Shop" he expressed this ecstasy/terror/bliss:

somewhat worried . . . the last time things
were humming like this
the molecules of my matter
spread too far apart &
I almost fell thru into the
Universal Dynamo of
Singing light . . . .

And yet, he couldn't quit trying to lift that tent corner of the Big Top. In prison he had found his voice—mostly to scream—but he never found out why he had to keep screaming. In "Style 4" he wrote, "Let me fly, man, fuck it, a grand free fall before the smash . . . ." He concluded, "If I could only love, hate, write a poem, maybe I could sleep."

Whenever Wantling began to settle in, something would always turn up to remind him of the humming. In "There Goes Another Sidetrip" he recorded, " & then/ just when I think I'm getting/ my shit together/ the humming starts . . . ."

Like the rest of us, he didn't know what he wanted; unlike the rest of us, Wantling kept pouring those chemicals. It was only a matter of time. (From a certain legalistic point of view, Wantling's mistake may have been succumbing to illegal drugs. The unique drug-tides of the time were crucial, and the drugs of these times swept over him. However, again conjecture, their very illegality—leading to his incarceration—may have been the best five years of his life. Without San Quentin he might have remained a nickel-mooching wino—perhaps still "alive" and slouching on the outskirts of Bethlehem, East of Eden, along urine-dank alleys of East Los Angeles.)

So, disappointed by friends, enemies, lovers, well wishers, literary sycophants, dissappointed they took his shit, disappointed they didn't. He gave tests; they passed/failed, but his mind and his body kept failing. Sure, after he'd puked and shit and stolen and ranted and scavenged and ravaged and raged he'd be asked to leave. Then after a short time he would be "getting letters . . . come back soon we love you."

Ruthie cut loose. At least insofar as she was concerned, the poet was on his own. Though occasionally strained, they remained friends, and in late March 1974 while watching Wantling speaking to some of his students at I.S.U. she wrote this poem:

how can i write you a
love poem
a
poem that would
tell something of it all
something of you
something of us

i remember
the dogs we buried
the alligator you brought home
the ducks in the basement
the mice named lucy, haiku, recess
how you cared for them all
how you wept when they hurt or died

the tall grasses we ran the dogs thru
the high night of full moon love
the rose each day of my pregnancy
and the baby who would die 1 day old

the back rubs that turned us on
the poems read aloud in bed
that put us to dreams
the wasp we killed and cried over
these soft things i remember

and i remember the hate
the years of playing
i can hurt you more than you can hurt me
how you hold your head
with the black cork-screw curls
hold your head
puking up the pools of vomit
poison—liquor—poison
retching & crying
my screaming at you
STOP
write—smile—be happy
my thinking the Zen way
you offered me
an answer
to your love affair with death
the wall-paper spit
the broken chairs
windows
doors
the months of no love making
the jails
bails
nut houses
hospitals
the air flight to see the hippie girl
you loved & thought it might
be your baby
i'd better write for Modern Romances
I LIVED WITH A POET

but i loved/love you
and the memories show me
the jazz you taught me to enjoy
the books you gave me to read
the days we did yoga together
fasted together
rode bikes together
the puppies we raised
the kittens we nursed and
always there was the stink of self destruction
the stench of vomit
and always there was
the kites
the surprise toy gifts

i want to write a real love poem
that will touch you

color you
be a gift to bandage
the scab or pain

oh the price of such love
and the silence of its death
so easy
so sand-like
the waves are gone
you vomit alone
i try to write love poems
and my memory is gone
to 10 years of rose vomit on my back
where the hand cannot reach

Alone in the abyss, Wantling remained tortured, half manic, half depressive. In what is supposedly his last poem, he wrote,

Late in the evening poem for
Mennonite alcoholic ward where
Johnny Carson comes on TV
& my friend Scrimgeour calls me
/wants to cheer me up
Hems & Haws about my wife's
divorce; somehow gets me
laughing & I laugh again &
say Fuck it; Fuck it
divorce, Fuck it alcoholic
ward, Fuck it Johnny Carson
especially, Fuck it comedy,
Tragedy, Fuck it Big Zero
Fuck it especially Fuck it &
love it all . . .

Zaffiri, who liked to call Wantling "the Last Hipster," remembers a dorm-like house in Normal during the late Sixties which some of the more audacious I.S.U. students inhabited. Because of its outrageousness it came to be called "The Abyss." Zaffiri recalls Wantling would be found dead-drunk/ or dead-whatever with such monotonous and unerring frequency that those living there kept asking, "When's he gonna die?" Just when his friends began to believe he was indestructable, Wantling upped and died. Zaffiri, who had taken him to hospitals countless times, hospitals themselves weary of admitting him, family, wife, colleagues, heads, freaks—he exhausted them all. But like Oliver Goldsmith's dog, it was he that finally died.

During his last days, Wantling, legally separated, had been living alone in a small apartment in Normal. He'd been on a binge again, his

wife, Ruthie, called the hospital and an ambulance came for him. He cried a lot; he was afraid of dying. When they carried him outside he looked up at the moon and yelled hysterically, "I'm naked!" Then he calmed down and laughed. Then he cried again, "I'm going away, Ruthie, I'm going away!" Ruthie was frightened when she heard this, but since he seemed better the next day and spoke of traveling to Phoenix, she felt assuaged. Zaffiri, who was there, remembered:

> I had believed this myth myself, that Bill was on a deliberate and calculated suicide course. As far back as 1967 while I watched Bill debauch himself senseless night after night. I was certain that at any moment he was simply going to die. In fact, I was surprised, seeing the massive insults he offered to his body and nervous system that he didn't die. And so after awhile I even began to believe the possibility he could not die, to believe that he was so tough and resilient that he could not hurt himself. Even the night I helped the ambulance attendants carry him bloodied from his apartment and into the ambulance, I was not that concerned. He'd been drinking without stop for three weeks. His hands were gashed and bleeding because he had smashed out the windows in his apartment. I guess to an outsider, this would have seemed an incredible scene, but like many around Bill, I had seen it all so many times before that I was only slightly moved. In no way did I expect that he would die this time. I felt it was just another bad drunk and that in a week or so Bill would check out of the hospital and start all over again.

Concerning his death, several things of interest can be noted. Among his papers Wantling recorded a "vision" one midnight on November 13, 1961 (in San Quentin) which offered several presentiments: twenty-two years from 1961 the second coming of the Messiah would occur, and this Messiah would be a woman. At this point Wantling prophesized his death would be at 4:49 a.m., May 5, the year 2000, when the Messiah would be about sixteen. He would die in London during the Apocalypse. However, William Wantling, born November 7, 1933, died on April 2, 1974 at 12:45 p.m. in the Mennonite Hospital, McLean County in Illinois. His father's death certificate and his are virtually identical: cause of death—heart failure. Wantling's body is buried in the Oak Grove Cemetery, Leroy, Illinois, under a marker obtained free from the U.S. government because of Wantling's service in the Marines. The exact whereabouts of his dancing spirit is presently unknown.

Very shortly after his death, professors William Linneman, James Scrimgeour, and others of the English faculty at I.S.U. in a small and gentle ceremony planted a tree on the school's campus in memory of the poet's death and life.

The Moth's Rapture

two girls barefoot
walking in the rain

one speaks of exile
one the things she

does when wild the
mood of love is on

her, shining perfect
things

then the farms the
fields the swelter

of Iowa of Illinois
of Indiana skies red

red the heartland
Easter & the church

a jungle of lilies
nothing & desolation

& nothing the sadness
the high hot skies

night
coming on across the

land across the
sweating the sordid

the sun-sunken land
the desolate towns

dying dead
& I?

I swim into this
raw fire's blood red

red my heart charred
& cindered my wings

stood stiffly pressed against
    the wall
arms folded
                staring
. . . flinched
when the bullet sang
                        fell
outward into the cobblestoned
    court
one too many holes in his head
for stealing from Americans

the street in front of our house

the street in front of our house
isnt much travelled, but
it managed to kill our Doberman
last winter, got Toms puppy about
2 months later & killed our cat
2 summers ago—to celebrate such
efficiency the city is going to
widen & pave it—yesterday they
began cutting down the old maples
& elms lining each side—its
either shade trees or curbing &
I got a nice walking stick out of
it when they cut down the cherry
trees on the corner to make a new
parking lot—this morning I read
in my new *Science News*
how methyl-mercury poisoning from
fish is not the only source of
deformed babies but now wheat
is a known source—the government
has known this since 1966 & I wonder
if rice is the next methyl-mercury
kill to our credit—& on the
facing page of *Science News*
I read about the jawbone fossil
in Kenya extending the line of
Australopithecus back 5.5
million years & how *Ramapithecus*
is at least 14 million years old
& I think

with 5 generations to a hundred
years, thats about 3 million
generations of us just since
we admit to being hominids
I cant even conceive of 3 million
have trouble with a hundred
but I know thats a lot of lives
& think
that if we use ourselves over
again
thats a lot of living I did in
3 million generations, how come
I stay so dumb?

View from Cell E-4-21

The sailboats are out today. It's
windy today. Windy and spring
today. Windy, and
spring.

A light rain drifts over the bay. A
soft rain, light, finding at last the
rainbow. Soft rain, soft sun, soft
. . . warm. And drifting as the boats
drift, spring flowers on waving
blue fields. Soft flowers
White flowers, white
sails, white rain. The bay
blue, what else? Blue.

And I? Do I believe, as the one who
walked on water? I would talk,
drift, as the boats, the rain, the
sun. As they. I, fish, bird, vagabond
prince—imprisoned in thick air.
Barred, unbelieving, devotee of
the Lie, past master of defeat. Who
might have knowledge of my way?

Heroin

what
I remember of the good times . .

high, once I ate 3 scoops of icecream
high it was the greatest
greater than the Eiffel tower
greater than warm sex, sleepy
early on a Sunday morning

and once, high . . .
so high I never reached that peak
again, happy my wife & I
lie coasting beside a small pond
in an impossibly green park
under a godblue sky
birds swimming V's on the smoky water
the sun weaving patterns through the
leaves, small shadows swimming on
her face & arms
& she says—Baby, I feel so *fine.*

so fine . . .
that was twice
the rest was nothing, even
less
the pain's still there

San Quentin's Stranger

In Death Row's dim undersea
light, he watched them
preparing the Pellet, testing
the cables & pullies, & it
held his terror of the dawn

He read again
her last letter
& knew his last bond
with life
was this memory
of a girl's cool hand

During the next hour
a chaplain came
to offer an empty hope
But he would not allow
that futile prayer, that
wasted hour

In the last half-hour
his despair shifted
& in that slight pivotal
point he embraced
the life which consumed him
found there was no fate
he could not surmount
with scorn

from Sestina to San Quentin

for Ken Whelan

Do you remember now?
How the grey and green walls rose invincible about us?
How we raised our eyes to the sheer heights climbing to a final
pinnacle perspective
Until high, high off over our heads we saw the
Sun-stricken gun-towers, the archer-turrets of ancient castles?
And how, scudding by the turrets, scudding through the child-blue sky
Great puffed balls of popcorn clouds went tumbling by, the
Chaste being chased by reflected crimson from a dying sun?

Do you remember how the gulls went wheeling and crying their shrill
plaintive cries?
How they spun down in tightening spirals to spy upon us and climb
again?
How their wings pounded the air until, catching a rising
Current of warmth they spread their wings wide and were free, free
and still, serene, hanging
Poised and then swiftly gliding as the chance quick current
Drifted them off over the deep blue waters of the bay?

Poetry

I've got to be honest, I can
make good word music and rhyme

at the right times and fit words
together to give people pleasure

and even sometimes take their
breath away—but it always

somehow turns out kind of phoney.
Consonance and assonance and inner

rhyme won't make up for the fact
that I can't figure out how to get

down on paper the real or the true
which we call life. Like the other

day. The other day I was walking
in the lower exercise yard here

At San Quentin and this cat called
Turk came up to a friend of mine

and said Ernie, I hear You're
shooting on my kid. And Ernie

told him So what, Punk? And Turk
pulled out his stuff and shanked

Ernie in the gut only Ernie had a
metal tray in his shirt. Turk's

shank bounced off Ernie and
Ernie pulled his stuff out and of

course Turk didn't have a tray and
he caught it dead in the chest, a bad

one, and the blood that came to his
lips was a bright pink, lung blood,

and he just laid down in the grass
and said Shit. Fuck it. Sheeit.

Fuck it. And he laughed a soft long
laugh, 5 minutes, then died. Now

what could consonance or assonance or
even rhyme do with something like that?

Once You've Been a Dopefiend

once you've been a dopefiend
for a year, you learn anyone

can turn snitch. but when
the Word came out on Chester

the Bear, we all felt bad.
as far as people in The Life

go, he was one of the best.
it was his chick who finally

offered to Burn him, but she
was Evil & we didn't dig it.

so the next night Al & I took
him out & got him lushed. he

was Sick & we said we weren't
holding. so he gulped down a

pint to kill the Pain. Al &
I split—came back 20 minutes

later—told Bear we'd scored.
well, Bear took half a greedy

spoon, drew up—& it was just
that simple. anyone could've

saved him the first half-hour
so we drug him back into the

alley & covered him with an
old L.A. countyfair banner.

if I hadn't of been so high
I think I'd've cried . . .

I Get On My Bicycle

I get on my bicycle & head
towards Dealers to pick up some hash
theres snow & some ice
left on the streets &
2 blocks up, city workmen
are buzz sawing down
4 tall old elms
to protect parked cars
from their branches
but the sun comes out
& its getting warmer &

theres only one soft roll of clouds
off in the southeast, so
white they make the sky even
more blue
& now the street ice is melting
the noon hour begins to smell like
children
the dogs come out
there are 3 birds wheeling their
stark shadows against the empty
sky
3 girls leave a diner, roll
their car windows down, stop &
pick up 2 boys walking back to campus
one girl
jumping out of the car, hopping
up & down
with short happy hops—Hey!
Harry! C'mon! We'll
give you a ride . . .
laughing almost too hard to shout at
Harry & he comes lumbering back a smile
cracking his face in half
the dogs running circles on the
sidewalk, sniffing under tails &
yapping the sky blue sky blue sky
& a boy & girl holding hands back to
junior hi smile . . .
I ride by some young girls & they
smile too & before
I even get to Dealers I'm
hi

Dionysus In Summer

Hear me!
Falling, rolling, sounding down a mountain
Pass my 10,000 golden-hammered horns calling coursing the beaches
of an endless sea
I come bounding, slender, risen again
I come to stand and laugh, recalling echoes of spent spring grown, of
returning fire
And cut my certain final way rising through the tender air the green
and vibrant
Growing air, and indomitable, unstoppable inevitable, living for this
season's song I drunken come

See me!
See the wild and delicate hare nibble, stare moon-maddened, transfixed
As across the green and shadowed glen creeps my sudden form
Now watch the silver wooded pool lie waiting for my flute, my
    sounding horn, my pipes and bounding form
And hear the sudden sounds of summer, the shudder-shriek of mangled
    hare
As goat-footed, certain, final, earth-intoxicated, I drunken come

The Day the Dam Burst

& what if the dam should
suddenly burst
If suddenly I should run
headlong, frothing, haphazardly
hurling shrapnel grenades
into high-noon crowds?

if suddenly tossing aside
the dead ugly ache of it
all, I equalled the senseless
with my brute senseless act?

O My, wouldn't I
shine? wouldn't
I shine then?
wouldn't it be I then who
had created God
at last?

"But See How Cunningly the Trap Is Baited . . . "

for Edward Lucie-Smith

very few of you understand
you think because I do so many San Quentin poems
I'm exploiting the place
building my own myth
there's that too, no use denying it
but mostly I want you to see we are all in San Quentin
the green field called Lower Exercise Yard is
    Great Britain
the asphalt-covered Big Yard the United States
the thick stone walls Society
East Block "the biggest cell-block in the world"
    is Asia

Europe is obvious, & guess who the GUARDS are
the rest of us are Cons, of course, waiting for
that Paranoid knife in our backs while the Muslims &
the Nazis firebomb eachother's narrow cells.

the best advice is what any old Con will tell you:
"Walk slow, drink a lot of Water"

It Was Tuesday Morning

It was Tuesday morning
I was flunking out of school
The February sun was hazy
I went to bed with 2 jugs of white port
to drink myself asleep
but I kept flashing back to the day before
I kept letting my dog off her chain
& she kept running out in the road to
chase the gasoline tanker
& she kept slipping under the rear wheels
& she kept yelping with surprise as she
sat in the road with her guts hanging out
between her back legs & her eyes
never stopped looking at me with shamed surprise
as if she'd got caught shitting on the rug
& then the sun was bouncing off her eyes
like a handball off a blank concrete wall
flicker/flicker
death
flicker
Then Dan came over with some Mesc & Acid
I dropped 2 caps & a tab & waited but it
started doing some real bad things
So I borrowed a nickel from Dan & jumped
on my bike
It took 2 months to ride the half-mile
to the liquor store & the fifth of 100-proof
vodka kept muttering under its breath
during the 100-mile ride home
things like
—We're gonna get you Wantling, you're
number is really up this time, Baby . . .
& to stop its goddam muttering I slammed
its neck against a bus-stop bench & chug-a-lugged
it but it kept mutterin stupidly, instead of
warm there was an icy thing in my belly, muttering . . .

& the flashbacks were coming on faster now
like some strobe-light gone mad with prophecy
It was me in the road with my guts hanging out
& I was hungup on the pain, the shame, the
surprise in my eyes
I couldn't even see the road anymore
. . . maybe my bike knew the way home by itself
Anyway I was there, back in the bedroom
but the muttering was louder now
nervous, ugly
& I went for all the old pills I'd stashed
when I wasn't sure what they were
There was half a handful, all colours
& I dropped them & wished the sweat
would stop running down my back legs
& hoped I wouldn't puke till the pills
began to work
But after a while things started coming out
of the corners
muttering
coming straight for me
& I looked down, curious, to see the
dot on my left wrist
widen into a black rotting ring
& then the artery jumped out
& started gushing blood 2 feet into the air
Then the blood turned to pus
& the muttering steadied into a loud hum now
crackling with shrieks & static
& beneath it somewhere there was a drum
There were 10,000 steel-heeled boots
stomping out a refrain
—Now now now now it's your turn now . . .
& I guess some of the shrieks were mine
for 2 days later my wife found me under
the bed curled up in a ball, covered with shit
& vomit
But here I am now fairly calm
full of tranquilizers & group therapy
It evidently wasn't my turn after all
What I wonder is—Why all the bullshit?
I never wanted to be a poet anyway
I'd carry a lunchbox just like everybody else
If only the muttering would stop

for Ernie Marshall if he's still around

on the Streets, he'd lived
the baddest Western ever made
armed robbery every night
so often that nobody'd ever
heard of him, tho he made
Ring twice, the record book

Ernie, jealous of Oedipus,
had three tragic flaws:
he was black
he was intelligent
he really loved to Come

I knew him in San Quentin
every morning like prayer
shadowboxing in the Lower Yard
& he had this white Kid who
hustled for them
O for a while it was Icecream
it was starched dungarees every
day, their jacket collars rolled
it was Paranoid Corner, sitting
in the Sun

also there was Bob, a crewcut
guard from Harlan County
used to dogeye Ernie every day
didnt like to see him handle
that Kid
—Whats a nigger doin with
sumthin like that anyhow?

Ernie's probably Gone now
Rage & Colour dont mix

For Poetry For Chicago For Obscenity

for Frances Vaitekunas

Stare into our eyes. They open windows
on a pasture. Sun & stretching animals
lovers racing towards a pond. Did we
dream you gypsy tiger?
Here, now a

million brushfires burn from Troy to
Hiroshima, & we have learned to die in
many ways.
We transcended, for a time,
the solitary cell, the skin, the isola-
ting tower. We have been to Babel twice
& back. Chased by mobs with torches in
their hands . . .

Last week, the judge sentenced us in Greek
like a clerk scratched hieroglyphs in
sand. Last night we died. Cards
were transferred from computers to the
trashbins. Yet incessant howls are heard
indignant at this swindle called Society

In Zoology Lab

in Zoology lab
tanks of frogs
cans of grasshoppers
await our dissecting kits
I pause above my earthworm
pinned to my table
my scalpel poised
—decide—
put my microscope away
—leave—
I'm flunking anyway
because I'm dumb &
because of all this death
yet my stomach
acknowledges
the decision
not to go back
—calms—
stops burning
outside the anatomy lab
I stumble over a crate of embalmed cats
waiting for the scalpel
outside a Taiwan prison
a Czech prison
a Cuban prison
outside prisons everywhere
an old man is taken from his cage
pinned against a courtyard wall
bullets

dissect his counter-revolutionary corpse
in Berkeley
in Chicago
in Ohio & New York
a fiberglass phallus
dissects a young girl's skull
students scramble
slipping in her blood
men in the costumes of a pig
—grunt—
—satisfied—
in Texas
in Louisiana
in Ohio and Mississippi
juries serve up the slop
a young black gets 99 years
for slipping an agent
the dope he so repeatedly begs for
men in robes
in costumes
everywhere
—grunt—
—squeal—
satisfied
back in Normal
I'm shown the scrupulously clean
the antiseptic lab
where waltzing mice
removed from antiseptic cages
are implanted
with cancers
where students with clipboards
record deaths—write term papers
dream of the day
when they
will implant those cancers
I leave
go to work at the head shop
my brothers & sisters come in
grunting
in their fringed leather jackets
half-eaten hamburgers
in their hands
the head shop closes
I leave for ISU & class
see Nikki in the Union, remember
I owe her a turn-on
walk out on the quad, do

2 numbers by the new
construction site, stare
at the stumps
of all these cutdown trees
walk back towards the Union
not talking
on Acid, my
eye can see
the lightbulb flashing on & off
60 times a second, but
now there are things I can't see
but I'm flunking Botany too
& in the greenhouse after class
seedlings receive a Beethoven tape
sprout randomly & well, while
seedlings subjected to taped factory
noise
droop
with uniform dullness
die soon
the grad student claims
or survive into stunted strangeness
& he points to a foot-hi sapling
intricately
ingeniously
wired into a box of tubes & dials
—*That* he taps the largest instrument
—*That! is a modified electroencephalograph . . .*
& a stylus scratches a drum turns
graphs tiny waves like ripples on a pond
—& this ! he grasps a branch
of the sapling & rips it off
points to the drum as
ripples jerk into jagged peaks, then
subside
—*this! is the equivalent of a*
scream . . .
smiles proudly, watching my face
I turn & leave the greenhouse
search the sky outside
for a sun
a sign
a mushroom cloud
anything
my stomach jerks
in jagged peaks
graphing
the equivalent of a scream

Initiation

20 years after cubscouts
WEBELOS returned for me
carried me up Stone Mountain
under the purple double-dome
left me there
on the 3rd day I saw her
etched into the window of my hut
& she was hawk, she was eagle
hanging the edge of a red & dying sun
black, hanging, poised
then wheeling, diving the void
screamed down upon me
clutched me
we were one
carried us up, up above the sun
into the no-longer-dying
light, ah the light

why should I return?

We Had a Fight &

We had a fight &
I left that morning
with my sleeping bag &
a dollar-85
cigarettes but no toothbrush
& a pint of white port
it took 6 hours to hitch from
Normal to St. Louis, 365 mi
I spent 50¢ for another pint of
greystone white port
yeh fuck it
waving the pint over my shoulder
walking up the freeway, thinking
what an asshole I'd be showing
back in Normal the next day
—hows the weary traveler, how
was Berkeley, ha ha you punk
then a cougar stopped
heading west
by the time we hit Sydalia I
was all right again & took
the wheel & drove straight thru
to Denver. in Cheyenne I picked

up 3 lbs of apples & 3 codeine
cough medicines
Utah & Idaho were in there some-
where but I was out of it till
we hit Portland
outside Eugene I stood on the
freeway 4 hours till a rusty
volks bus picked me up &
we all crammed together, 2
mattresses & 12 squatting freeks &
I had a very young tit jammed in
my ear. it smelled lovely &
someone passed a joint
when we stopped I used a standard
oil card to fill the tank & let
them give me half of it in
cash & bought a fifth of greystone &
someone passed a joint
freeks kept getting on & off & I
passed the port. the young tit
changed into a long red beard &
he kept squeezing my knee
sucked on the port. someone passed
a joint . . .
well shit, we had a flat & lessee
ate walnuts & oranges out of groves
got lost twice, spent the night in
a Trappist monastary, almost froze
going over Mt Shasta, & finally
got into Berkeley. it was 5 pm
& I'd been on the road just over
a week. I filled the tank again &
they drove me to Berkeley Way where
I edged into a small yard full I mean
FULL of dogs & knocked on the door &
a naked chick answered. they're
always beautiful, arent they? this
one was too.—are you Bill? when
I nodded she grabbed me & hugged
me hard & drug me inside.—Irv's
working & wont be home till tuesday
wld you like to watch me do my yoga?
this poems getting long but if I
end it here you'll think I got a
piece of ass. nothing that crude
baby. but she broke out something
called MDA which is a very heavy

acid trip & I dropped 2 & some more
freeks showed up & we all got
naked & mind-fucked for 2 days till
Irv came home. but thats another
poem again

We Left Monterey &

From joy springs all Creation, by joy it
is maintained, towards joy it progresses
and into joy it enters . . .
—Sanskrit-Devanagari script, the Upanisad,
7th century B.C.

we left Monterey &
the sun was 72, hot
for December
we pulled off US 1
at Garepada Beach &
raced across that white
sand, the mescaline
still singing thru us
even after 30 hours
Naima was first out of
her clothes & into the water
Jim right behind her
Irv & I slower, then the dogs
the undertow was bad &
there were sharp granite blocks
hidden by the foam
but we'd all paid our dues
since birth
then we ran down the
beach drying in the sun
the dogs biting at our
footprints & barking
like young dogs bark &
we rolled in the sand
we had all paid our dues

I remember Naima was
a princess in her white
sand gown & Jim & I
looked like pronto pups &
Irv's hair showed thru all over
then we wandered up a creek
clefting the highway cliff &

thru a tunnel under US 1
& found a grove, all trees, all
green soft weeds & an elfin
waterfall
I kept waiting for Naima to
hand us an apple but
she was into silence
that day & there werent
any apples anyway
but there was a pool
just right for 4 pair of feet
& it gurgled just right &
the grass was tickling my
balls & our eyes met &
the sun hummed thru us
we had all paid our dues &
we sat there, our feet
& eyes touching, the dogs
snapping happily at the
bubbling water & the
day held out its hand &
we stupidly took it &
nailed it to our foreheads
& ever since
have not stopped loving

The Head Shop

the head shop
is getting ripped off so regular
theres hardly enuf bread
to pay salaries at the end
of the month
so I put up a blacklight sign
    "if you come in here to rip off
    cause you know we wont
    call the Man, yr burning yr
    own Bros & Sisters—this
    place supports 7 Freaks"
then we split to Rick's &
he breaks out his Lebanese hash &
Marcie feels bad about
charging me $3 for 2 tabs of
Sunshine but cant get off her
business is business hangup, cant

just give it to me but smiles &
digs out a gram of hash & presses it
into my hand for a bonus & we
do it up too & I'm following her
around the pad hoping for something
even sweeter but then her man
slides in the front door & I pick up
the look in her eyes & dig that
with just a little shove
in the right direction Marcie
will let her man back in, so I
hum & haw a bit, say how I've
got to get to class . . .
Rick doesnt want me to ride my
bicycle to campus, thinks I'm too
stoned—Marcie offers to drive me
but I tell her I dropped the Sunshine
with all intentions of making this
bicycle ride the hi spot of my
Trip—secretly proud that I dont
push for making it with her, then
peddle off toward campus, stop at
the liquor store, buy a pint of
white port for insurance
in case the Trip gets too far out
knowing I have no downers at home &
believing in being prepared & then
peddle off again, am only
about a mile down the back
road when the moon comes out
full, the mercury-vapor street-
lights brighten considerably
headlights half a mile away focus
in on me & suddenly
I'm spotlighted on the street-world
stage—God, or something, is humming
down on me, promising & threatening
vague, wondrous things . . .
now, I never did dig a stage, dont
even like to read my poetry aloud
& was Peoria Illinois' most enthusiastic
atheist at the age of 12
but something is happening
somewhere inside I hear demands
for another, heavier
sacrifice, find a large stone, tenderly
lay the virgin pint of port on it
ceremoniously reverently

smash it with a heavy stick
& ride off again, somewhat worried
. . . the last time things were humming
like this
the molecules of my matter spread
too far apart &
I almost fell thru into the
Universal Dynamo of Singing Light
but then I grin, thinking of
delusions of grandeur, think of
Cleaver & Leary in Algiers fucking up
the revolution with Power Grabs, & I
glance up into the humming throbbing
unavoidable Light & laff & laff—it
takes several subjective hours to
peddle 2 more blocks but laffing
hours, laffing all the way
home

It Was 5 am

it was 5 am
the only station coming thru
was this 50,000 watt clear-
channel out of Austin &

this jesus freak got on for
someplace called Ambassador
College &
for over an hour he revealed
how long hair
drugs
youthful disrespect for the
Father, for the old standards
& beliefs
& for authority
was destroying the traditional
family unit was undermining
Democracy &
threatening our survival
as a great nation

I lit a joint &
thought how grateful I was
that he was right &
thought how there was
still hope

My Dear Friends

"Rational thinking which is free from assumptions ends in mysticism . . . ."
—Albert Schweitzer
"ab absurdo ad astra" (from absurdity to the stars)
—William Wantling

Yesterday in East Peoria Illinois a 16 year old kid saw an 8½ ft tall white hair monster 3/3 toes on each foot He'd seen it once before but didn't tell anybody cause he thought nobody'd believe him—but twice was too much & it was on the Channel 25 10 o'clock news . . .

Today a small but enthusiastic posse of men were out hunting the 3-toed 10 ft tall white hair monster & one of the men shot himself in the left foot with his 12 gauge shotgun . . .

Tonight on the 10 o'clock News large tracks were shown on tv leading into the wooded city dump & sure enuf, there weren't clearly the full measure of toes on each foot, or at least it looked that way . . .

Being involved in certain perplexing metaphysical problems I dropped 2 tabs of green acid (very clean) & at 9 o'clock this morning was still tripping heavy when I took my grad psych exam & got a "B" . . .

I stare through my new telescope a lot but don't notice much—I always remember tho to feed the dogs the cats the goat, however & Ruthie's only pissed at me 3 days a week now, is it because I'm getting older? I wonder if McGovern will end the war & I wonder if I'll ever write the great global novel in which everything is explained & I wonder what ever happened to Tim Leary but most of all you can bet yr red ass I'll be in front of Channel 25 at 10 o' clock tonight cheering for that 12 ft tall 3 toed monster . . . .

Style 2

we were speaking of style. It is
my contention that style is every-
thing. this will be the second
lesson in that discipline. you must
realise that Poetry is Style. Great
Poetry is Great Style. now, poetry
& style can be found anywhere. recently
for example, a woman, obviously disturbed
over a random event, wrote a letter to
the editor of her local paper. here is
her letter—I have only provided line
breaks for certain emphases:

I want to tell you
what happened to your cat

after you dropped her off—the
first few days
she stayed just about where you
dropped her
waiting for you to come back
then hunger
drove her on along the road
searching for food & shelter
by now
she eats anything she can find, rotten
wormy, disease-laden . . .
dogs & other animals
chase her &
she is almost hit by passing cars
exposure to freezing nights
almost kills her
but your cat is tough . . .
I found her today
she was beside my mailbox
right where you wanted her to go
that nice farmhouse in the country
only trouble was
your cat couldn't see me
her eyes were pasted shut
with infection
every bone
showing through her dirty hide
her stomach distended
with worms & starvation
too weak to stand
she made a little noise at me
but it was for you
to hear . . . she is dead now

this, indeed, is Poetry, not because it speaks
of random, terror, abandon, of
Quick too quickly cut, but
because it speaks of it with Style
because of concrete, sensory detail, stark
outline of emotionally charged events
extreme economy and, woven through it all
a strand of universal raging wonder at
the savage god called Death—& the quick &
quirky shadows of our lives, running
randomly longside (forget the
feathery crunch of airy bones as
kitten mouths a sparrow, as
sparrow beak breaks bugs, as

bugs suck twitching microfilia, as
on & on, as life . . . ignore all that
though that is Style, too) who
didnt live that kitten's ripped-off
ravaged life, feel its puzzled wonder
at brute & endless pain?

a letter to the editor. I cried. Reality
imbued with Style. it must be Style that
made me cry, Reality
enrages me . . .
& of course I disagree with the
primal thesis. anyone with one shred
of Life & Style left, after 7 years in
this society
will know the choice, if there is choice
to choose: give that cat a chance
in fields & pastures—for the "humane" society's
Cyklon B chambers, their "decompression" chambers
their "simple injections"
all
all in the style
of *State,* all style into
Concentrationnaire
which we know too well of late
one must be careful:
Style creates Reality (but thats a later lesson
you'll enjoy)

In the same sunday paper containing the
letter to the editor
was an article on
cruelty to animals (against it). certain
examples were given to support the thesis
that we are teaching our children to repress
emotions such as empathy, compassion:

"One highschool student was traumatized during a
diabolical experiment conducted by the biology
teacher; dissecting a half-anesthetized screaming
kitten in front of the class."

this article, too
had a certain power—it touched
on plagues
our TV tubes
screen nightly. now, to become poetry, it
needs only a twist of style. any style will do . . .
suppose, today, we try a sparse style. how do

you handle a plague?
sparsely
underemphasis
for impact, repetition for intensity
we throw
"diabolical" away—it impedes our creeping insight
that this, indeed, is evil—not the random cruelty
we call life
but logic, rationality
icy & insane,
one of our own Kind . . .
always
oh . . . break the lines for a subtler eye:

One
highschool student
traumatized
during an experiment conducted by
the biology teacher
dissecting
a half-anesthetized
s c r e a m i n g
kitten in front of the class
One highschool student
traumatized
One . . .

now class, please note
that
upon dalliance with a simple-minded style
the writers insinuate their other theme:
that without at least one more
traumatized student
we are indeed, now, looped & feedback through
a Devil's snare
our TV tubes touch upon it nightly:
l'univers concentrationnaire
thus we near the end of lesson 2
on style
lesson 1, entitled *Style 1*, was
a lesson
on style
by Samuel Beckett
opere citato; quod vide

NOW FOLLOW FOOTNOTES (all in proper form
for faithful readers of my lines

who'll notice how professorial
I've become, now that I'm, uh . . . *certified*
a Universal Instructor

yet not everything has changed. I & the kitten
still feel alien, extraneous
still feel a kind of
stupid wonder at our sudden toss to doom
& we
make a little mewling cry sometimes
when Random tricks our flow
with endless brute insistent
pain . . .
well, the kitten died; & I have
dulled in 40 years
previously
I raged & snarled & pissed & moaned
fuck you, Universe! Shithead!
fuck you I howled
you *Punk!* I'll rip *you* off
instead!
yes
once I tried to outrage
the random quirks of quick
the way they outraged me
but now I write of perverse curious things
without a curiosity; I inscribe
these ugly Random lines
with only random anger; I've achieved
a certain academic detachment & aplomb
my colleagues, now, are
more impressed
the Universe
much less . . .

Oh
before you leave
you may wish to prepare
for next week's lesson:
Style 3! please
read the entire works
of Chas Bukowski. never
mind the
Man . . .

Style 7

ALIVE, ALIVE

Ah, Pablo. Your name so common, as
your love. Common. Complete. All-
encompassing. Everything delighted
you: a rock. a tree. a bird. a
brown & wrinkled face. a pear. a
plum. a belt-buckle. Sea-foam on
your tongue. Your woman's smile . . .

Oh it was acid & swordblade, dew on
a blossom a spiral nebula the hollow
of a tree leaping fish on fire, a
god of stone the State. There was
hate, there was love & blood but
never an abstraction—everything was
concrete, quivering in duplicity, in
its tender pride & shame. Even the
agony delighted you. It was all
shining all beautiful . . .

Even the cunning crab of cancer (or
was it junta bullet?) in your brain

Conversation Recorded in an East Village Coffee-House

between Francois Maria Arouet de Voltaire, Niccolo Machiavelli, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau

(note)—I have not used footnotes identifying quotations because of the inordinate number of footnotes which would be required. In this play, conversation will be preceeded by the name of the persons speaking, and, within the individual character's dialogue, quotations from published or collected material of that speaker will be notated by *RED* quotation marks.*

All quotations are from sources now in the "Public Domain." Quotations are from the following, and will not be individually identified as to source:

For **Voltaire**: Letter to Mlle. Quinault, August 16, 1738; Voltaire in His Letters; Letter to Rousseau, August 30, 1755; To Frederick the Great, April 6, 1767; *Candide; Essay on the Morals and the Spirit of Nations; The Ignorant Philosopher;* and *Philosophical Dictionary*, 1764.

For **Machiavelli**: *The Prince; The Art of War;* and *Discourses.*

For **Rousseau**: *Emile; Confessions;* and *A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality,* 1754.

(The scene is a small coffee-house on the edge of NYC's East Village. Inside it is dark, almost depressing. The usual crowd is sitting around, talking, playing chess, staring at the wall, waiting for a pickup or a connection, etc. At a table in the corner, somewhat removed from the regular crowd, sit three men—dressed in the contemporary "casual-hip" style. They are hunched over in intense conversation. **Voltaire** is tall, unbelievably bony and emaciated. Without his wig he looks like the Medieval drawings of Death. He is almost ugly, but in the way Abraham Lincoln was almost ugly. **Rousseau** is of medium height, quite good looking in a soft feminine way, yet his burning eyes and quick vitality denote a mind that is violently masculine, sensitive and brilliant. The other man present, **Machiavelli**, despite

*The note on red quotation marks was Wantling's to his publisher. Quoted material here is enclosed between black quotation marks in the dialogue. — Ed.

his Italian origin, does not look Mediterranean at all. His nose is average and well-formed, his cheekbones high, his mouth very determined, femininely determined. He appears to be extremely intelligent. He is almost beautiful. He could be homosexual.)

Voltaire: You know, mons. Machiavelli, that I have been mentally rubbing my hands for several centuries, anticipating this conversation with you. You must realize / that you epitomize / every thought and every thing / that I despise.

Machiavelli: Ah, the Poet! He is making rhymes already. Ho. But please, signor, call me Nickie. All my *friends* call me Nickie. You may end up being one of those, a *friend.* Do not judge me too soon.

Volt.: The ages have judged you, sir, and found you lacking. It is for me only to hate everything you stand for.

Rousseau: Ah Francois, you always were so pig-headed and impetuous. So quick to hate. Do not forget, it is your honored self that said "Opinion has caused more trouble on this little earth than plagues or earthquakes." As Niccolo stated, do not judge him too soon. If we are to have dialogue, we must have understanding. Suspend your judgement, Man!

Volt.: So be it, then. "His Sacred Majesty, Chance, decides everything."

Mach.: Thank you. Jean-Jacques, I believe we are of a like mind. But it is strange that Francois, who has written many things that sound like myself, should be so hostile towards me.

Volt.: Explain yourself, Dog!

Mach.: (unperturbed) For example, Francois, you have been quoted as having stated "For seventeen hundred years the Christian sect has done nothing but harm." *I* have stated "The Church has ever kept and keeps our country divided."

Rouss: "General and abstract ideas are the source of the greatest errors of mankind." Do not quote us out of context, Sir.

Volt.: Yes, degenerate. Any words we may have in common form an example that high improbability does not mean impossibility. That quote was merest coincidence.

Mach.: Ah, then. Coincidence also was your "The public is a ferocious beast; one must either chain it up or flee from it," and my "For the people resemble a wild beast . . . ." One would almost think you had stolen it from me.

(Voltaire is silent, but ominously so. His face is a study in apoplectic symptoms. Rousseau chuckles quietly to himself.)

Rouss.: This is all very amusing, messrs., but we are avoiding the central issues. With all due respect, Niccolo, you are, as my compatriot Francois has stated, a representation of everything we both despise—everything we would fight to the last salty drop of blood!

Mach.: Sir, you yourself said "Liberty is obedience to the law which one has laid down for oneself." I expect no greater liberty for myself than this, for I have laid down but one law for myself, and that is to follow Truth to her lair and to drag her forth into the sunlight so that all may see her.

Volt.: (Admiringly, despite himself) That, Sir, was a delicious turn of phrase. I cannot help but admire your virtuousity with words. But please tell us just one thing; you who know Truth so well. What does She say to you?

Mach.: (Intensely, with a certain ring of bitterness) She said this, signors, and my heart quivered with the pain of it. She said "According to the experience of all history, whoever prepares to establish a commonwealth and prescribe laws, must presuppose all men naturally bad, and that they will yield to their innate evil passion, as often as they can do so with safety; and though those passions may lie concealed for a time, they spring up from some hidden cause, of which we can give no account; but Time then discovers them, and is therefore justly called the 'Father of Truth'."

Volt.: Ah, your heart quivered with the pain of it! No one knows better than I that "there are truths which are not for all men, nor for all time." However, as a poet I also know that the most absurd statements take on the ring of truth when put poetically. And did you not also say, "Nickie," that "It is necessary that the prince should know how to color his nature well, and how to be a great hypocrite and dissembler"?

Mach.: (Still unperturbed) I did. Still, you should finish the quote, or be guilty yourself of the crime you so shortly accused me of,

quoting out of context. "For men are so simple, and yield so much to immediate necessity, that the deceiver will never lack dupes." Do you truly hold me in such low regard that you would think me unintelligent enough to class you gentlemen with the simple and the easily duped?

Rouss.: There is the bone of contention! For you believe that human nature is basically weak, evil, lazy, and reprehensible. The terms are interchangeable—basically, you are saying that human nature, and therefore nature herself, is originally warped or misbegotten. I have tracked Truth to Her lair myself, dragged Her forth beneath the harsh sun, and saw that nature, and therefore human nature, was originally perfect. Laws and greed have perverted this nature. "Laws give the weak new burdens, and the strong new powers; they irretrievably destroyed natural freedom, established in perpetuity the law of property and inequality, turned a clever usurpation into an irrevocable right, and brought the whole future race under the yoke of labor, slavery and money."

Mach.: (softly, so softly his sarcasm is almost unnoticed) You undoubtedly have discovered a cure for this condition?

Rouss.: (has the grace to blush, but proceeds doggedly) I have. It is quite simple, really. "Find a form of association which defends and protects with the whole force of the community the person and the goods of each associate, and in which each, while uniting with all, may *still obey himself alone,* and remain as *free as before.* This is the fundamental problem of which the *Social Contract* offers the solution. Government exists only to carry out the expressed will of the people!

Volt.: (Excitedly) Yes, cynical one, master of duplicity! Ethics must be divorced from politics *indeed*! That was not even true in your day. You were but too lazy to dig to the root of the problem. (Proudly, in the manner of a true egoist): I too lived in a time dominated by absolutism; nevertheless, I daringly espoused the cause of tolerance, progress, and cosmopolitanism while at the same time attacking orthodoxy, both political and religious. For my pains I spent most of my first 46 years in exile or in prison. (Dramatically, in a self-consciously profound manner): "As a rule there is no comparison between the crimes of great men, who are always ambitious, and the crimes of the people, who always want, and can only want, liberty and equality. These two sentiments, Liberty and Equality,

do not lead straight to calumny, rapine, assassination, poisoning, to devastation of one's neighbor's lands, etc. But ambitious might and the mania for power plunge men into all these crimes, whatever the time, whatever the place."

Rouss.: I hope, old friend, that you are not being prophetic.

Volt.: Eh?

Mach.: He means, Francois, that you are greedy, restless, and in a way quite Bohemian. (Almost apologetically) He means, that although you have said "The individual who persecutes a man, his brother, because he is not of the same opinion, is a monster," you are a man who suffers intensely under criticism. He means that "whenever men are not obliged by necessity to fight, they fight from ambition."

Rouss.: You are very cunning, Niccolo. But I mean only a portion of that. Francois and I have been close friends since we met in Geneva. (Nostalgically) He was 61 and I 43. He accepted me as an equal, "while I, overwhelmed with misfortune of all kinds, was destined one day to serve as a warning to all . . . ." Our friendship was quite close, at least (remembering) it *was*, until that fateful day we disagreed on a minor turn of logic . . .

Volt.: (Violently) **NO LOGIC OR TURN OF LOGIC IS MINOR, MAN!** And just what did you mean when you said you disagree with only a portion of what this degenerate said of me?! (Spoken in a persecuted manner.)

Mach.: (Smiles benignly, not victoriously, but almost sadly) Ah, the "comrades" prove my truths for me. "If men were all good, then indeed my precepts would be bad; but as men are naturally bad, and will not observe their faith towards you, you must, in the same way, not observe yours to them: and no prince ever yet lacked legitimate reasons with which to color his want of good faith."

Rouss.: "Nothing is more dangerous than the influence of private interests on public affairs." Did you dare think, Niccolo, that we learned about human nature only by observing others? One must plumb the depths of one's most private self, muckrack, wallow in the sewer of lust and self-hate, examine rationally the most profound and empty despair, examine also the potential for Beauty and Good latent in us all, the highest desires opposed by the most obscene

lusts, examine cooly these things and then know that they are present in each of us—this is where the labor *begins*. We proceed from these points—and since men have a need to aspire to the best in themselves and all men . . .

Mach.: (interrupts) Here is *the* bone of contention, messrs. I know that men are naturally bad, and aspire not to the best in themselves and others, but to the expediency of the times, with *supremacy* always the individual goal. "Man the wolf to man," I believe one of your compatriots has stated. Fortune varies and men remain fixed in their ways. There is Free Will only for the adventurer with the courage to act, and this courageous man always becomes the Prince. (To himself): "Cruelties should be committed all at once."

Volt.: You degenerate beast! (In increasing apoplectic anger): It is because of such as *you* that "most men lead lives of quiet desperation."

Mach.: (Softly, ominously) Would you be so kind as to stop calling me a degenerate, Francois?

Volt.: (ever-increasing helpless anger, almost rage now) DO NOT CALL ME FRANCOIS! You object to degenerate, then, but do not object to your true nature of *Dog?!*

Mach.: (Softly again, but this time with an ominous note of victory in his melodious, feminine voice) Have we not both stated, Francois, that the people are ferocious beasts? We are animals, Francois. Animales! How can I object then to my true nature? And yours? (laughs in nasty, feminine but melodious manner.)

Rouss.: (Finally aroused from seeming passivity) "With children use force, with men reason; such is the natural order of things. The wise man requires no law." (Above speech begins in most noble manner, but as Rousseau continues, his voice rises in anger—last few words almost shouted.)

Volt.: (Face crimson with anger) "Great crimes are always committed by great ignoramuses." DEGENERATE!

Mach.: (more ominously now) I told you about that word, Francois! I *really* wish you wouldn't use it. "Men have less hesitation in offending one who makes himself beloved than one who makes himself feared; for love holds by a bond of obligation which, *as mankind is bad* (last four words given in, for Machiavelli, almost a shout), *as*

mankind is bad, is broken on every occasion whenever it is for the interest of the obliged party to break it." IT IS BETTER TO BE FEARED THAN LOVED! (Shouted, yet with a catch in his voice.)

Volt.: *Francois*!? And I told you about calling me Francois, Degenerate. FILTH! SCUM! PERVERT! PERVERT! (this last in a triumphant shout.)

Rouss.: (Noting how pale Machiavelli has become) Francois! Francois! *Come* to yourself, Man! Is this the way for the greatest writer of the ages to behave? Was Bukowski right, then, when he said, "Writers and Poets are a bad lot"?

Volt.: (Turning his rage on Rousseau) You . . . You . . . (Persecuted) *You* dare to challenge me, you weakling, you of the maudlin *Confessions*? Were it not for my aid and recommendations, you would be wasting away yet in some Bohemian coffee-house in Paris. I MADE YOU! DO NOT FORGET THAT. Jean-Jacques. I MADE YOU!

Rouss.: *You* made me? (White-faced with betrayal and rage): You made me? Maudlin "Confessions"? Maudlin? Do you know what that effort cost me Francois? The "Confessions"? Cost me in agony, in agony of self-search? YOU MADE ME! You . . . You . . . (Turning to Machiavelli, with a bitter half-laugh): Niccolo (gestures towards Voltaire): I'd like you to meet the Prince of Poets. The Prince. The original Prince. You could have been speaking of him all the time, in your amoral views of men and politics. (Bitterly but triumphantly.)

Volt.: (Rage and paranoia—can take no more. He raises his legendary coffee-cup high and brings it down viciously on Rousseau's head. His pent-up rage manifests in a high, womanish scream as Rousseau, fatally wounded, drops): "I WISH THAT YOU WOULD CRUSH THIS INFAMY!"

Mach.: (Indolently, sarcastically, softly) You who believe in reasoned discourse. You have proven my thesis, Signor*a*. Signor*a*!

Volt.: (Seems not to hear—stares, appalled, at Rousseau's body beneath the table—speaks as if to self) . . . he believed in the perfectability of Man. I, who always feel betrayed, persecuted, I HAVE PERSECUTED AND BETRAYED MY ONLY TRUE FRIEND! *O my God, my God* . . . (This last a high scream of pure horror and agony): No, no . . . (Turns to Machiavelli, stares at him as if he

sees Machiavelli for the first time—SCREAMS): *Devil. DEVIL!* It was you, your doing. You who believe in dissembling for the sake of power . . . (raises high his coffeecup again, as if to smash Machiavelli's skull also).

Mach.: (Reaches in slash of left pocket and whips out switch-blade which snicks open with metallic flash as he brings it up from under and shakes it towards Voltaire's abdomen): "Hence it comes about that all armed Prophets have been victorious, and all unarmed Prophets have been destroyed."

Volt.: (With raised coffeecup, has slight edge on Machiavelli—starts to smash down on Machiavelli's skull—halts smash, hesitates for a half-second, presents his vulnerable abdomen to Machiavelli's switch-blade): Strike, degenerate, strike reptile, STRIKE! (last word screamed)

Mach.: Die, *Prince!* (Rips into Voltaire's abdomen, twists blade.)

Volt.: (Takes wound smiling, stares at Machiavelli while grasping table-edge—as he speaks his lines he slips slowly to floor): You . . . have lost this . . . argument, . . . Degenerate. (Slips to floor, writhes about and finally settles, twitching, beneath table—speaks, lines delivered in improbably strong voice, with dramatic emphasis of the truly second-rate actor): "I die adoring God, loving my friends, not hating my enemies, and detesting superstition." (Gives melodramatic gasp, twitches twice, dies.)

Mach.: Signed—Voltaire, February 28, 1778. (Tears course down Machiavelli's cheeks—speaks resignedly, as if to self) I wish I had not won . . . (Sincerely) I WISH FRANCOIS HAD WON! (musingly) I wonder who *did* win . . .

(end)

** "A long dispute means that both parties are wrong."

—Voltaire.

Wm. Wantling / 12-66

Endnote to *10,000 r.p.m. & digging it, yeah!*

there are a few things to note
before I leave
but not many
I haven't learned much in 37 years

1. all governments are eventually appalling
2. pain hurts
3. to eat meat is murder
4. to be without love is inexcusable
5. to love is the most difficult of all

"Bill Wantling is the best poet of his age."

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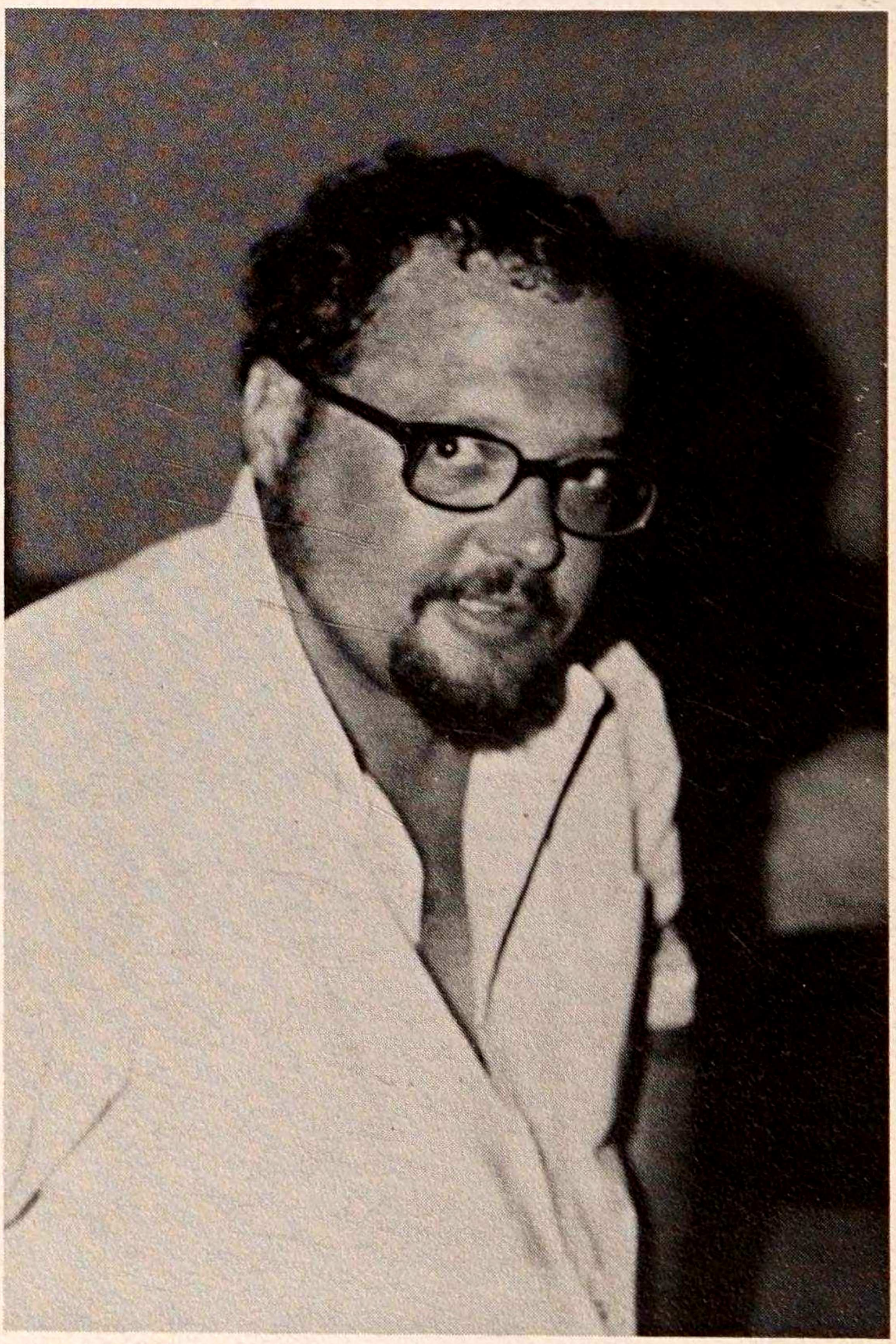

William Wantling 1933-1974

"We are the less for his going, the more for his having been."

—Len Fulton

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